

SERMON for Easter 4 – May 3, 2020.

Readings: Acts 2: 42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2: 1-10 and John 10: 1-10

Suggested Hymns:

TIS 111	Praise to the Lord, the almighty
TIS 145	The King of love my shepherd is
TIS 655	O let the Son of God enfold you
TIS 147	To God be the glory

Today is often referred to as Good Shepherd Sunday, which you will see reflected in our psalm and gospel readings. On top of that, traditionally between Easter and Pentecost Sunday, our first reading comes from the Acts of the Apostles, and the great adventure which was experienced by the early church – particularly Peter and then Paul.

Today's snippet from Acts is perhaps my favourite of the whole book. That glimpse we have of what it was like to be part of that fledgling movement, which would eventually become the Christian Church.

While this, to me, is a profound illustration of what the Christian community could be like, we of course know, it did not last. Like many organisations which start small with a beautiful vision, then grows exponentially, as more and more join, humanity being what it is, power struggles and other ideas come in and the beauty of the simplicity which originally made it so attractive, becomes lost.

Theologian, Bishop Tom Wright writes about Luke (the writer of the book of Acts) laying down 'the four marks of the church' in this passage:

The apostles' teaching; the common life of those who believed; the breaking of bread; and the prayers. These four go together. You can't separate them, or leave one out, without damage to the whole thing. Where no attention is given to teaching, and to constant, lifelong Christian learning, people quickly revert to the worldview or mindset of the surrounding culture, and end up with their minds shaped by whichever social pressures are most persuasive, with Jesus somewhere around as a pale influence or memory. Where people ignore the common life of the Christian family (... fellowship, which is more than friendship but not less), they become isolated, and often find it difficult to sustain a living faith. Where people no longer share regularly in 'the breaking of bread' ... they are failing to raise the flag which says 'Jesus' death and resurrection are the centre of everything'. And whenever people do all these things but neglect prayer, they are quite simply forgetting that Christians are supposed to be "heaven-and-earth" people. Prayer makes no sense whatever – unless heaven and earth are designed to be joined together, and we can share in that already.¹

We understand our contemporary Christian community as those gathered together in fellowship groups or denominations. But there is a certain disconnectedness to our sense of community - we are still very separate, private individuals and remain so. So different to the original community which Luke describes.

The so-called primitive communism of the early Church had little to do with a belief that the world was coming to an end, and a great deal to do with the sense of fulfilment: the world of debt, the world of injustice, *had* come to an end on Calvary, and they were modelling the new world of forgiveness. They weren't so concerned with the last days of the old world as with the first days of the new one. If teaching, fellowship, bread-breaking, prayers, let alone 'theology', sounds boring to some, maybe it is because we've forgotten that each of the four aspects of the early Church's daily life stood the world's values, not least its systemic injustices, on their head.

Abundant life, then: that is what Jesus has on offer, not the thin, hang-on-like-grim-death approach that you find in some churches. Jesus' teaching on the 'shepherd' in John 10,

explores the intimate relation between shepherd and sheep, with the emphasis on the shepherd's desire that the sheep be led in the right direction, fed and watered, and kept secure for ever. And the point throughout is that Jesus is contrasted with other would-be Messiahs: thieves and brigands, he calls them. There were plenty of those in Jesus' world, leaders of marauding gangs on the one hand and 'holy brigands' (fundamentalist terrorists, we might call them) on the other. Jesus' way of leadership, of founding the new movement, was totally different, and totally relevant to his day and ours. A different style, an upside-down ambition, a self-giving love that, as Peter saw, would then be imitated by his followers - the world waits to see what can happen when the wandering sheep, brought home by the Shepherd's love, then start to live by the same pattern. ²

How far we *have* wandered! How far we are from understanding where Jesus was coming from and to what he was alluding.

The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament makes the interesting point that shepherds in 1st century Palestine were generally viewed with suspicion, considered dishonest, and were not allowed to serve as witnesses in legal proceedings. Apparently, as a class of people they were looked down on. They were a rough lot of people, having to spend many long hours outdoors and without the benefit of human company. Their social skills were probably not the best.

Most historical sources agree that shepherds were not highly regarded in Jesus' day, and yet isn't it interesting that a group of shepherds were the first to get the news about the new King who was being born to save humankind? A social group that lacked respect and credibility in the culture were the first witnesses to the miracle of the Incarnation. Hmmm... remember the first witnesses to the Resurrection of Jesus? ANOTHER marginalized group in the culture - women! Maybe there is a theme here - God deliberately chooses the marginalized and unimportant in the eyes of the world to witness His Mighty Acts, and Jesus uses the illustration of a Good Shepherd again and again in the Gospel accounts.

The Good Shepherd in today's Gospel is the one who is not a thief and a robber. He is the one who stays with the sheep and protects them. A sheepfold in Jesus' day was a rectangular enclosure, built with stone walls all around. The walls were high enough to keep out robbers and to keep the sheep in. The Sheep Gate was an opening in the wall in which the Shepherd himself would sleep and protect the sheep. In a sense, the Shepherd was the Gate himself. In a similar way, Jesus is the Gatekeeper for the Heavenly fold of God's children: US! ³

There is something about the gatekeeper which jumped up and bit me as I was reflecting upon this passage. I was overwhelmed by the insight that we, as committed Christians are called to be gatekeepers, and the awesome responsibility of that task.

We are responsible for allowing the true shepherd into his flock, allowing the voice of Jesus to be heard in the world, heard and recognised by those who would be in his flock. It is the gatekeeper's task to let the shepherd IN, **not** to decide which of the flock he is allowed to take out with him!

Jesus said he came to bring life, abundant life.

Some years ago, some from I travelled to Kalgoorlie with others from the Esperance Parish, to hear the controversial retired American bishop John Shelby Spong. I know some in the parish at that time were great fans of his writing and theology. I have to admit that I have always struggled with his theology, so I guess I went more out of curiosity than anything else. While I still find his extreme, liberal theology often sits uncomfortably with me, I found on that occasion a man profoundly in love with God and with his fellow humans, and a man I could deeply respect.

He spoke of his creed, and this states that:

God is the source of life, and to worship God is by living;

God is the source of love, and to worship God is by loving; and

God is the ground of all being, and to worship God is by having the courage to be everything I can be.

“Therefore”, he says, “I build a world where every human being can live fully, love wastefully and be all that they were created to be in the infinite variety of God’s humanity.”⁴

For me this speaks of the abundant life Jesus says he came to bring. The reality of a God who wants us all to have abundant life;

- ❖ who is love, who laid down his life for us, who also wants us to love each other wastefully, not counting the cost in petty reckoning;
- ❖ who wants us to be everything our individual potential can give us.

This is not just for us but for everyone - the flock, for those who are in the fold (the Church) and those who have strayed; and to give us a sense of what true Christian living and community is all about.

As restrictions begin to ease, and hopefully we can meet to worship as church again soon, I wonder what it is we would like to see brought to the fore, that would make us an attractive community, drawing others to God’s abundant life? What is it that we can do so that others may hear His voice?

Jesus said, I am the Good Shepherd, I call my sheep by name and lead them out and the sheep follow me because they know my voice, and I lead them down the pathways to abundant life. Amen.

Revd Sally Buckley
3 May, 2020

REFERENCES:

1. Tom Wright in *Acts for Everyone*, pp. 44-45.
2. NT Wright, *Twelve Months of Sundays – reflections on Bible readings for Year A*.
3. Stephen C Secaur from a sermon in 2002.
4. Bp John Shelby Spong as quoted from a TV interview he did with Geraldine Doogue on the ABC programme *Compass*.