

Sermon

There's nothing sentimental about being a shepherd. [Most of our pastoralists today might operate out of Macquarie Street – but in those days a shepherd was up against it – you had to be tough to be a shepherd – to look after sheep, goats, and cattle and then to make a living off the land.] To be a good shepherd meant being tougher than the rest.

Being a shepherd was to be shift-worker except that the shifts were 24/7. Even today we know that someone who works the land is never off duty. [Interesting to read in *The Australian* I think the survey that showed that Ministers and Farm Labourers work for the longest hours in Australia today.]

Being a shepherd meant being alert – reading the weather, scanning the horizon, sensing danger, understanding animals, knowing the country, and so on. Jesus would know the difference between a good shepherd and some upstart who fancied himself. I sense that Jesus was not someone who could be taken for a ride very easily.

But being a good shepherd meant – for all the hardness on the outside – you had to have a soft core – a heart that reads animals - like a professor reads a book

So when Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd” [Jn 10.11] He was saying to his listeners and to us, “I know everyone of you.” “I understand what makes you tick, I know your needs, and I sense your fears, your hunger, your thirst. And I know what to do to protect you and help you.”

Let me just say that again. Did you hear those words from the Gospel reading? Jesus said, “I know my own and my own know me – in the same way that the God our heavenly Father knows me and I know the Father.” Listen to those words. Wherever you are coming from today – our Lord knows you – intimately. He cares for you in the challenges of life, in the decisions you must make, in the problems with your children, your aging parents, your sadness, and so on. He rejoices with you in your good times. It is he who gives you the courage and enthusiasm to live.

This is the risen Jesus, the One who met Thomas with all his doubts; the One who called Mary Magdalene by name in her loneliness and bewilderment; the One who reassured Peter when he had let Jesus down; the One who came out of the shadows to walk alongside two disheartened and perplexed disciples.

Centuries earlier Isaiah described God as being like a shepherd to his people [40.11] and then goes on to describe his great love for them. “I know you by name, you are mine” says the Lord.’ [43.1] Today we hear Jesus echoing those words and speaking reassurance to us: “I know everyone of you.” “I understand what makes you tick, I know your needs, and I sense your fears, your hunger, your thirst, and I know what to do to protect you and help you.”

We live in a world today, just as it was in Jesus' day where people are exploited, used and abused. It is important we understand that in his time as well as in our own there were

people who were there to make money rather than look after the sheep; in it for the profit rather than the compassion.

“A hired hand” can be the manager, the person chairing the board meetings, or indeed any employee. A true or good shepherd is one who is not there for his own profit. The test comes when he’s faced with a choice. When the predators – scavengers – those with self-interest at heart – come; what will he do? The false shepherd takes the easy way out. He deserts the sheep. The true shepherd stays. He is prepared to die for the sheep.

I cannot help as I read this and reflect upon it that this is the calling of priests in the church. The religious and the “secular” leaders of his day were called shepherds [just like some religious people today are called pastors – means the same].

Jesus would often make the point that unlike good shepherds; religious leaders were out of touch – often with God and with people. They failed to meet their spiritual needs and they failed to alert people to danger.

This is what the Bishop says at the Ordination of a Priest:

*Be a pastor after the pattern of Christ the great Shepherd,
who laid down his life for the sheep.*

Be a teacher taught by the Lord in the wisdom of holiness.

Lead the people of God as a servant of Christ.

Love and serve the people with whom you work,

*caring alike for young and old, rich and poor, weak
and strong.*

*Never forget how great a treasure is placed in your care:
the Church you must serve is Christ’s spouse and body,
purchased at the cost of his own life.*

*Remember that you will be called to give account before
Jesus Christ: if it should come about that the Church, or
any of its members, is hurt or hindered as a result of your
negligence, you know the greatness of the fault and the
judgement that will follow. Therefore apply yourself with
diligence and care, and fashion your life and ministry in
accordance with Christ’s example.*

It is a daunting call – but one before God we have chosen. It is also in some lesser extent the calling of Jesus upon all he knows and loves. Didn’t he also say, “Love one another as I have loved you”? [Jn 13.34]

Jesus is only partly being religious when he’s speaking about being a good shepherd. There are echoes in this reading of one of the most solemn chapters of the Old Testament – Ezekiel 34 – where kings, rulers, indeed priests and prophets are denounced as unfaithful and corrupt rulers: feeding themselves not the sheep, working for profit rather than the good of the flock. *"You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost"* [Ezekiel 34.4]. They are warned that God is their judge.

That’s precisely the point that Peter is making before a crowd of people who included the High Priest and the High

Priest's family. He accuses them of crucifying Jesus – the good shepherd. They too are now guilty before God – for putting to death the One who is the Good Shepherd.

But we read here in John's gospel that it is more than being put to death by evil people; Jesus lays down his life for the sheep. He defends them even at the cost of his own life. What does that mean?

It means this: that you and I are in great danger. There are many ways we can live in life – but the danger is that as we go through life we become more and more self-centred, turned in on ourselves and then we think the world should revolve around us. We forget our common humanity. Jesus knew this danger and he was determined that he would show us that God really cares about us – even if people abuse God's love and put him to death. We are in danger because of the hired hands – waiting to molest and harm us.

That's what the cross of Jesus is all about. God's love flying like a flag over the all world and all the people that God has made and loves. It's like a rallying point for us all. We are not forgotten – there's the sign – just look.

But Jesus is also, “the one who both lays down his life and then takes it again.” We know that not only does he declare himself to be the good shepherd – through self-sacrifice; he is the good shepherd who has conquered death.

It is through his risen life that we are known by him.

You and I are known and loved by God – even if we don't realise it, or are not aware of it, still it is true. The God who put the universe in place, who formed the planets and who ordered the snowflakes and the flowers also knows you and me and he cares about us.

Then he protects us and defends us. A shepherd would collect the sheep put them in a pen and then lie across the gate so that no sheep could get in or out without disturbing him. Even the good shepherd cannot shelter us from every thing that might afflict us – but he knows about it and the moment he hears our call for help he's there.

In Psalm 23 [set for today] David – the writer – who had been a shepherd himself says that when he walks through he valley of the shadow of death the good Lord is there with his rod and staff to comfort him.

In a few minutes we will sing the hymn “The King of Love my Shepherd is” which is based on this Psalm.

This hymn was written by the Revd Sir Henry Williams Baker [1822 – 1877]. He was Rector of the Hereford village of Monkland, a hymn writer and compiler of the main hymnbook of the Anglican Communion in the 19th & 20th Centuries Hymns Ancient and Modern.

Taking the words of Psalm 23 he turns them from a Hebrew Psalm of confidence in God, into a hymn that celebrates the work of Jesus and our fellowship with God through Christ in the sacraments.

He begins by recognising the majesty and compassion of God in the striking juxtaposition of King and Shepherd. The constancy of God is celebrated and God's never-failing love assured. The quiet waters of Psalm 23 become a stream of living water, picking up the promise of Jesus we heard in the Gospel last week [John 4.10-14].

The third verse inserts into the ancient psalm the parable told by Jesus of the shepherd who goes to seek the lost sheep [Luke 15.4-6]. However, it is not a sheep that has strayed, but it is I who have wandered, been found and carried home. It was these words of truth and comfort which Henry Baker quietly repeated as he lay dying.

These words lead us confidently to the cross of Jesus which leads the way through death to the assurance and hope of heaven beyond. This is not poetic licence but a reminder of the words of Jesus who says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." [John 10.11]

The richness of the hymn continues in a new image where as in the psalm, the Shepherd becomes the gracious host. Here, though, he welcomes us to the heavenly banquet of which the Eucharistic feast is a marvellous preparation. More than static symbols of bread and wine, Henry Baker conveys the power of the inward and spiritual grace of the sacrament in the phrase Thy unction grace bestoweth. Unction is literally an anointing with oil and in Scripture it is often a sign of God's spirit feeding or giving gifts to a person for their ministry [1 Samuel 16.13].

The last verse brings us back to the unfailing goodness of God, not only for the length of this life but also to the certainty of being with him forever.

The good shepherd not only keeps his eye on the sheep – he makes himself visible so that the sheep can come to him. Just like he did to Mary Magdalene in the garden or the disciples on the road to Emmaus. He comes to us and in the words of the old hymn; "*He walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own.*"

It takes courage to live our lives to the full – responsibly and in deep love with God and service to our brothers and sisters. In just the same way – it took courage for the God who knows us and loves us – to be our good shepherd.

And God wants us to hear his voice, to talk to him so that he can walk with us on our life's journey and then finally welcome us into his house for ever.

Let us pray

Jesus, good shepherd of the sheep,
by whom the lost are sought
and guided into the fold:
feed us and we shall be satisfied,
heal us and we shall be whole,
and lead us that we may be with you,
both now and for ever. Amen