

## **The Good Shepherd or the Meat Industry, Take Your Pick ...**

Sermon for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, Year B, 22 April 2018

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor, Canberra

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Honorary Associate Priest

Acts 4: 5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3: 16-24; John 10: 11-18

+In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Friends, it's a very good thing that the Lord is our shepherd, and that Jesus is the Good Shepherd, when you consider the alternative! Sheep certainly aren't well treated these days, left to miserable deaths in their thousands on Australian cargo ships. And what about care for people, especially the defenceless?

The behaviour of world leaders might suggest that the lunatics have taken over the asylum. Prominent men in the entertainment industry, studio moguls and actors, have been preying on young and vulnerable women. And what were Churches doing, what were

priests and even bishops thinking, to perpetrate systemic horrors on innocent children and then to cover them up? There's not a lot of good shepherds anywhere, it can seem, so the weak and exposed had better learn to make the best of it. They might be disabled or old or otherwise forgotten, or mentally ill, or sucked down by unemployment, addictions, and poverty. They might be pre-programmed to sell themselves short in life, never having been shown proper love and attachment. They might be outwardly successful but privately empty, uninspired, craving escapism in a life otherwise going nowhere, and hence prone to getting themselves in trouble. They might have set out playing the success game and ended up with a lifetime playing catch-up. And aren't the victims of our learned habits of self-sufficiency and maintaining control everywhere to be seen: abandoned children, aborted fetuses, heartbroken former lovers and spouses, colleagues and subordinates trampled on, and all to reap a harvest that's ultimately one of bitterness?

Friends, that's the story we're being invited to live by. Those are the rules of the game. Yet in this holy place where lives of faith begin in baptism, are summoned and nourished in the Eucharist, are set on a path of healthy mutuality in marriage, and at their end are celebrated and commended to God's mercy, we're invited to hear and believe and eventually learn to proclaim a different story.

Today in our readings we hear that different story, quite clearly and coherently, using the imagery of sheep and their shepherd. It's not a story that tells us we're autonomous, independent beings at the centre of the world, who might look to God for some help if we feel like it, while on the way to making whatever we can of ourselves. So, for instance, we don't hear today that the Lord is our personal trainer, as I once heard it expressed by a trendy Vicar, let alone our life coach, our financial advisor, or some other image drawn from the personal services industry. No, the Bible's unflattering image of us is that we're sheep: best understood collectively not individually, not

particularly bright, and prone to getting lost, so that we need care, leadership and protection.

How good it is, therefore, that this biblical image of God's people as sheep is matched throughout by God's promise to send us shepherds. Moses, David and the Old Testament patriarchs were shepherds. Likewise, the shonky Kings of Israel who failed to lead and to care for God's people were damned by the prophets as bad shepherds, and God knows their sort is still with us.

The great promise of Ezekiel was that God would come to shepherd us in person, and this is also the well-loved promise of our Psalm 23 this morning. Sheep have a lot to fear from wolves, from the meat industry, from the industrial-strength sacrificial demands of the Jerusalem temple, but our God wants to lead us beyond a life of threat, of sacrificial liability. The rod and staff that comfort us in Psalm 23 are the shepherd's tools for watching over the flock and for driving away its enemies, which is why our bishops still carry that

pastoral staff today—a symbol both of their husbandry and of their obligation to take confronting action, if necessary, on behalf of the sheep.

Jesus is of course the good shepherd, the model shepherd. He's not part of the system that oppresses the vulnerable—he's not subject to its rules, nor is he in thrall to its power. That's why we hear once again in Acts today that the stone rejected by the builders has become the head of the corner: because the system that does violence to the ill-fitting so the winners can keep their place has worked its old tricks on Jesus but wound up with an unexpected outcome. The system that condemns the vulnerable and looks away instead of intervening is challenged in Acts today. There we hear the story of God's healing compassion directed in Jesus' name towards a child of God in desperate need—the sort of person any such system would deem to be expendable and forgettable.

And in our Gospel from John today, Jesus completely turns the tables. The sheep aren't there to give their lives. They're not cannon fodder for the meat industry, or for the sacrificial engine of the temple and its religious apparatus—in fact, they're no longer pawns in anyone's game. Instead, we hear that Jesus has taken the place of sacrifice for every other potentially sacrificial victim of the system—all who've been hushed up, shoved aside, forgotten about, run over, or silenced. Instead, he lays down his own life for the sheep.

Jesus is very clear in today's gospel that his life isn't being taken away from him, as if the system has won—as if it's rules have gone unchallenged. Jesus insists that his life is being offered freely, not as a matter of tragic inevitability. Hence in light of his resurrection, what we see is more than the fate of just one more victim, silenced and snuffed out. The resurrection in John helps us properly understand Jesus cross: it's not the sheep who are gutted, as sheep always are. Instead, by turning on Jesus the system itself has been gutted, so that its workings are exposed, robbed forever of any

capacity to silence or enthrall us. We might say that the system has choked on Jesus and had to spit him out, to rephrase and update an ancient and venerable account of the atonement.

So, friends that's the story of who we are, of what our life as Christians means, and of what forces should and should not command our allegiance. Our epistle reading today from 1 John brings all this home to you and me and the Church. If we live at peace in the flock of Christ our Good Shepherd, our model shepherd, then we can be expected to follow Christ as our model, to share his desire for the well-being of his sheep.

This cashes out for Christians in terms of ensuring that our congregations are places of love and compassion and solidarity, without the rancor and carelessness that attach to a model other than Jesus Christ. Because, friends, we belong not to a fundamentally heartless system of dog eat dog, but to the flock of a gracious

shepherd—not to the meat industry of human sin, but to the pastoral celebration of God’s mercy.

And of course, as we start to get this right in our congregations, dealing with our fellow Christians, then we can expect to see our maturity of commitment spilling over in wider action for peace and justice. Because as Jesus says in today’s gospel, he has sheep who aren’t in this sheepfold who he also wants to be gathering in.

The Lord be with you ...