

We have said the Psalm, and heard the readings. It is not surprising that today, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, can be called 'Good Shepherd Sunday'. Today the Easter message of life and hope is brought together with, expressed by, the 'Shepherd' metaphor. We pick up the connection particularly in the saying of the Psalm – that famous Psalm of thanksgiving, praise and confidence: though travelling through the valley of the shadow of death, the psalmist exultantly sings of confidence in God for the gift of life.

The image of the 'shepherd' is a marvellous ancient metaphor. It was there in the Psalms and other Hebrew scriptures; we know it, too, through certain parables of Jesus and the way it is used in the gospels as an image of Jesus himself – the Good Shepherd. So it is a metaphor that has inspired Christian thinkers and artists – and through them, all Christians – down the ages. But there needs to be caution about how it is used, how it is interpreted. Understandably, it is an image seen to have a 'pastoral' dimension, speaking of loving care of the individual. And it does. But it is easy to get stuck with that pastoral imagery, with all its romance and beauty, especially when imagined in green temperate climates. But this is a far too limited sense in which the metaphor is to be used: it has much wider dimensions. Instead of in green temperate climates, we have to imagine the image against the dry harshness of the Judean hills.

The 'shepherd' image had long been an image for rulers, Pharaohs and kings. Perhaps this association of the image was best known, had its origins in the stories of David, the boy shepherd, who became the one remembered as the nation's greatest king. But not all rulers were regarded as 'shepherds' held in such high esteem. The prophet Ezekiel arraigned the political leaders of his day, the shepherds, who were neglecting the flock.

In recent times, the continuing revelations about the practices of big companies and mega-wealthy individuals have become painfully familiar. The Queensland Nickel saga seems to become more dodgy with every passing day. The Panama Papers have demonstrated the extent to which companies and individuals hide their wealth to avoid paying their fair share of taxation.

Following the leak of the Panama papers there has been some intense scrutiny of tax havens – for example, the release a few days ago of a report by the anti-poverty organisation Oxfam. This report, *Broken at the Top*, is said to be a further illustration of the "massive systematic abuse" of the global financial system. The report is based on an analysis of the financial affairs of the 50 biggest US corporations, and says that these corporate giants have stashed \$1.4trillion in tax havens – in an "opaque secretive network" of over 1,500 subsidiaries based offshore. Furthermore, over a six year period, these companies spent \$2.6billion on lobbying the US government; and for every \$1 spent on lobbying, collectively they received \$130 in tax breaks and more than \$4,000 in government loans and bailouts.

No doubt, among the company directors and board members there are many good and generous people. So, where does such anti-social and corrupt behaviour come from?

Last week, a Jesuit priest in Melbourne, Andrew Hamilton, wrote that it probably can be traced to an economic ideology that is widely accepted in government as well as in business – an ideology that sees the driving force of the economy to lie in competitive individuals whose work is motivated by the desire for economic gain. The national good is defined by an increased GNP and economic activity. All significant relationships that compose business are measured by their economic value; and if companies are seen through that lens, every form of competitive action that is economically productive will be legitimate, circumventing regulations wherever possible, just so long as it is not actually illegal.

So, he sees the present scandals as a fruit of an economic ideology that recognises the importance of economic striving for human flourishing, but neglects its human context. The

economy is the servant of the national good, not its goal. Human flourishing is based on the respect for each human being, the interdependence of human beings and the natural environment, and the priority of the common good. And the common good entails ethical relationships between companies and their workers, their customers, their investors, their competitors and the whole community, which their activities touch.

Tax dodging, though, undermines the common good. It contributes to dangerous inequality and damages the social fabric. What is needed is not only the recognition of the need to close loopholes that make such practices possible, but also the political will to do so. More fundamentally, what is needed is the fostering an alternative world-view that puts the human context – respect for each person and the interdependence of human beings and the natural environment – at the centre.

From the perspective of our theme this morning, what is needed is shepherd-like leadership.

In the ancient world, especially in the Hebrew writings, the ‘shepherd’ image had long been an image for rulers, Pharaohs and kings – those who were the powerful ones in the society. And prophets like Ezekiel arraigned those powerful ones of his day, the shepherds, who were neglecting the flock.

But in those ancient writings the ‘shepherd’ image was also a messianic image, a subversive image. In contrast to the leaders of his day whom he denounced as negligent shepherds, Ezekiel saw the shepherd messiah as one who would rule in justice and peace. The hungry sheep would be fed. The lost ones would be restored. Shepherding was a big metaphor which could encompass the vision of the reign of God with the full range of political, social and personal dimensions which that entails. It was much bigger than a pastoral image.

It was also a subversive image. To acclaim someone as the shepherd is to make a statement about counter claims and competitors. Acclaiming the reign of God the shepherd calls into question all other claims to authority. It is dangerous and leaves one vulnerable – vulnerable to being expediently dismissed as a troublemaker or as a threat or as a dissident. Some or all these responses killed Jesus.

In the gospels we hear of Jesus using the shepherd imagery to speak of his own activity. It was activity that pointed to God, that reflected the character of God. Jesus would give his life rather than be diverted from living that way. Where the leaders of Israel had failed to be faithful shepherds, and where the Roman Empire was brutal and tyrannical (anything but a shepherd!), Jesus stands as the one who has died – defying all the powers that deal in death; and stands also as the one who has been raised, winning life for all.

So, on this fourth Sunday of Easter we hear again the Easter message of life and hope. It is reflected in the story of Peter raising Tabitha from death to life. It is reflected also in the reading from Revelation where all the strange and perhaps estranging imagery is a way of asserting hope for people who faced hopelessness – an assertion of hope because of God who is their shepherd. So, today the Easter message of life and hope is also brought together with, expressed by, the ‘Shepherd’ metaphor - a metaphor to be understood as encompassing a vision that touches every dimension of life.

In the midst of all the bad news that the world brings us - of war, violence, crime, the uprooting of people, climate change, death – the message of resurrection is an assuring message of life and hope, and it is a challenge to all who seek to follow the Good Shepherd to remain firm in our commitment to strive for a more just and peaceful world. What we have heard in our readings this morning also speaks a prophetic message to those in any kind of leadership, challenging them to be true, life-giving shepherds, and calling us to hold them accountable, because of our primary allegiance to Jesus as the one true shepherd. Any way we can contribute to the building of a more just and peaceful world is a contribution to the growth and celebration of life.

But this dual theme of today – provided by the Easter message of resurrection and the metaphor of the shepherd – also touches us more closely and personally, inviting Christian communities (such as this one) and us as individuals to enter more fully, and more practically, into the Easter journey. Whenever we face the threat of death – the loss of loved ones or personal tragedy or broken relationships or difficult life circumstances – it reminds us that life is found in the midst of death. It calls us to keep faith, to continue to strive to live in compassionate and life-giving ways. If each individual sought to bring life to each person he or she encountered each day, and if each of us sought to be good shepherds to others, our communities would be places where there was sufficiency for all: places of equality, justice, peace and celebration. May we learn to be life-giving shepherds like this!