

NOT FOR OUR OWN SAKE

EASTER 4B 2024

Acts 4.5-12; Ps 23; 1John 3.16-24; John 10.11-18-

INTRODUCTION

Sweet and sour. Toffee and vinegar.

That is today's offerings: the Lord is my Shepherd (Psalm 23) on the one hand "...no other name under heaven...".

One makes us feel comfortable. The other makes us shudder in our progressive, violent and woke culture.

THE AESTHETIC SHEPHERD; CARRYING A SHEEP

The shepherd image is a staple of Christian life, hymns and art. Sometimes it is a grossly sentimental portrayal, sometimes moving and revealing. Psalm 23 is a secular icon for funerals seemingly used to provide assurance of a safe passage to whatever after-life the deceased's friends imagine. The secular version is, "I did it my way."

The image is so powerful that critics of the Christian faith sometimes use its telling beauty and aesthetic power to criticise the all too obvious faults of malign Christian pastoral behaviour. The child abuse evils are one such. The image of false shepherds, hirelings in John 10 spring to mind.

The image also emerges in the secular commitments to pastoral care in schools, universities, hospitals, all stemming from past Christian ideals and actions. The image celebrates

the care of the weak, vulnerable and lost in the world. For that I am grateful.

In the recent past secularists and atheists loudly proposed that Christianity, with its symbols, was a deadly disease on the national body politic. Yet, recently Richard Dawkins announced publicly that he would find it very problematic if he had to live in a society divested of all such pastoral aesthetic and images and the public actions that flow from them. So would I.

Remember Dawkins once claimed the universe had no deeper meaning of things built into its structure. Instead, that universe has “no design, no purpose, no evil, and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference.”

Trouble is Dawkins thinks the whole image is untrue.

Can something be useful in such a foundational and essential way and not be true? Is that a self-deceit? Is the aesthetic of Christianity enough to enliven and renew the human condition? Or is it simply incoherent to want the aesthetics of God without Godself?

THE PERSONAL AND RELATIONAL SHEPHERD; THE LORD

Ps 23 and John 10 portray the shepherd as personal and relational. The aesthetic of shepherd is the interaction of the sheep with the shepherd. It is not the cosy, wistful comfort of being held but out of harm's way. Instead, it is the substantial, living power of finding a new way of being a human being by participating in the life of God.

We will need to make a decision about that. Which picture will we choose? The need of childhood dependence or the risky act of opening up to the leading of a God who will take me through the whole human condition of suffering, toil, need and joy, including death.

Professor Dawkins aesthetic Christianity is an act of despair. The psalmist's conviction and experience, matched with Jesus' declaration that he is the good shepherd, declare that very basis of human living is in God's life. That is the condition called hope.

After all, the good shepherd lays down his life for sheep. This good shepherd risks the human journey himself, right through death. He invites us to join that life. He knows the sheep. That is the intimacy of life on offer. It is not an aesthetic; it is participating in a completely different life; intimately known and loved.

This is a life of hope, not comfort, lived in solidarity with God (YHWH). That is the whole point of Ps 23. Along the way we endure every need of humanity. We are driven, neither by despair or a baseless optimism, but the very life of Godself.

It the very life of the crucified and risen shepherd that is the substance of our humanity and thus is our hope.

THE UNIQUE AND UNIVERSAL SHEPHERD; THE ONLY NAME

There can only be one Godself. In a faith so relational there can only be One Name. Only One has passed through death to life. To engage with many 'names', many shepherds, is impossible. We would fracture our humanity. We can find the

substance of our life and humanity, and thus our hope, in the one good shepherd.

Hence, when Peter declares at the end of his speech in Acts, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” he is stating the obvious.

Salvation is the taking of our fractured humanity individually and socially and remaking it, now and for the future. The good news is that, participating in the life of the good shepherd who lays down his life for sheep and takes it up again, is the only way. It is not a way.

That statement will rouse alarm. Rightly so; we are suspicious of all claims to some kind of totalising knowledge. It all too easily becomes a power game. That happens when we turn salvation into a game of morals, numbers and divine accounting overseen by the few. Then one name is problematic. That is when Christianity becomes a cult.

However, the relational and personal logic is inescapable. We can only participate in one life; and so, find our own life remade.

To use Jesus words, “I am the gate for the sheep.” Jesus’ “I am the gate...” is the most forgotten of Jesus’ I am sayings. Peter is only echoing Jesus. There is one gate because there is one dying and one rising. Many years ago, when I was taking some instruction on Islam in Kenya my Muslim teachers made it very clear to me that Jesus did not die and therefore did

not rise again. Therefore, the Christian claim is untrue. There is no gate, no shepherd, no dying and rising.

It is challenging in our world to claim that Jesus is the gate. The claim to be both gate and shepherd makes Jesus unique. It also makes him of universal significance; unique and universal in his words and his deeds.

THE SHEPHERD FOR OTHERS; FOR THE WHOLE WORLD

His word is “I have other sheep...I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.”

The subtext of the Easter period is “I have other sheep...” Our task is to be the servants of the risen one to bring them into the space that we experience of the love between the Father and the Son.

Here the reading from 1John 3 helps. We might have begun with v.14, “We know that we have passed from death to life because we love another. Whoever does not love abides in death.” Death is not solely biological; it is existential. Hating is living in death now. Hating is murderous, death dealing activity at every level of human existence for everyone. Only one person has broken the power of death and hate. We share that life given us by the Spirit.

This love is not a future state but hope lived now. How is it lived? Truthfully in action. It is in truthful, loving action. It is paying attention to the world around us. It is about how we view the goods that we have. Are they ours or held in stewardship for others?

Herein lies the basis of Christian identity and mission. It is a living, breathing expression of the love between Father and Son. We are not conservatives or progressives. We are those caught up into that love. We are not program makers or followers of agendas devised by others; we are the program, in our living, truthful enactments of the love between the Father and the Son.

Love between the Godhead essentially defines us. This is the difference between being the church in mission and the church as a function of denomination, of politics, or any social identity movement.

That is our living hope day by day and the hope of the world.

Amen

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