

Good Shepherding

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church, April 25th, 2021 – Psalm 23 & John 10:11-18)

I don't know about you, but I know very little about keeping sheep. I know about their wool, the way the lanoline conditions your hands when you knit it, how you can create almost anything out of it. My brother's friend had to learn quickly when he inherited his uncle's sheep farm. In Australia we don't really have shepherds anymore. We tend to have dogs and motorbikes to do the rounding up. This country they say rode on a sheep's back soon after white man arrived a few hundred years ago. Poets and artists had it as their subject matter – Click Go the Shears or the painting by Tom Roberts – The Shearing the Rams. I suspect this work was hard, dirty, probably not that well paid and pretty thankless.

The bible on the other hand has a lot to say about shepherds and sheep. Some of our Jewish forebears were shepherds – Abraham, Jacob, Moses, a young David, Amos. The first visitors to the baby Jesus were shepherds, they were the first to receive the message about the Saviour being born. Jesus told parables about lost sheep, asked Peter to feed his sheep and called himself the Good Shepherd. In Psalm 23 we find God described as a Shepherd.

Psalm 23 has provided comfort for believers for millennia. As we read it, we can easily see why.

Let's take a quick look:

- With him we will be satisfied, my needs will be met
- He provides us with green pastures – an image of plenty
- He takes us to a place of serenity, of calmness, of peace
- He guides us in the right way
- Even in our hard times he doesn't leave our side
- He will keep us safe
- He won't leave us to battle our enemies alone, he will be with us
- He invites us to live with him forever

A picture of comfort, of peace, of safety and of love.

In our reading from John's Gospel the theme is extended. Jesus describes a little bit more about what being a good shepherd is like. In so doing he contrasts the life of a true shepherd with those who just see it as a job.

A good shepherd has a strong bond with their sheep – they are known and called by name. What a difference it makes when people call us by name, we feel valued, like we matter. The sheep are loved and protected by the shepherd. A hired hand is only involved out of self-interest – maybe the reward is payment or lodgings or a meal or two. A hired hand doesn't really care and at the first sign of trouble will get out of there and leave the sheep to face the danger on their own. A good shepherd in contrast will put their life on the line for the sheep. A good shepherd chooses this life and happily takes up responsibility for the sheep and their welfare despite the risks.

And yet the picture in John 10 has more, there is a picture of unity. The good shepherd watches over many flocks and will bring them together to live in unity. I am not sure what is meant by these other flocks, maybe it is other Christian communities and therefore has something to say to us about ecumenical matters. Maybe it is even more

universal (and controversial) than that and is a call to unity between all people of faith, whatever that might be.

Today is Anzac Day. Today we will hear a lot about young men laying down their lives for their mates. Perhaps that is a point of connection for Australia and New Zealand and the Christian faith. However, to continue the comparison I think probably diminishes both stories. Or maybe there is one more connection. Over the years I have heard and seen many who have been traumatized by their war experiences, including my uncle who could not talk about it for years and still has nightmares he cannot even describe. When I have heard people talk about their war experience, what I have heard them say it this has to stop, there are no winners, do not do that to each other, live in peace – and yet we continue.

The origin of Mother's Day which we will celebrate in a couple of weeks was about protesting against war and what it does to young men.

Maybe the legacy of Anzac Day and its awful sacrifice, might be to strive even more for peace and that then reconnects to the Christian story.

The picture we have of good shepherding in our readings today is about comfort, it is about abundance and plenty, it is about safety and protection, it is about peace, it is about putting others before yourself, it is about mutual relationships – truly knowing and loving each other, it is about unity.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd and invites us to imitate him, both as the Church and as individuals.

Maybe we are being called to 'shepherd' the local community in 2021. Maybe we are being called to provide sustenance to those hungry for food and still suffering the effects of our shutdowns last year. Maybe we are being called to provide spiritual sustenance as others look for meaning. Maybe we are called to protect and keep safe the homeless that are now appearing back on the streets. Maybe we are called to stand with others as they face their enemies. Maybe we are called to share our abundance, our abundant assets that surround us here in this place. Maybe we are called to get to know our neighbours, to be able to call them by name – then they will know they are loved and safe. Maybe we are called to work toward unity and that will mean understanding others and putting aside our preconceived ideas. Maybe we are called to provide a place of peace, a place of calm, a place of serenity.

Whatever we are called to will be risky, that also is the nature of good shepherding. Being a good shepherd is a choice, do we choose to put others first?

May you know the comfort God brings. May you know the peace and rest God offers. May you know the abundant love and grace God has for you. May you hear Him call you by name each day. May you know God's protection in the hard moments. May you be able to say – the Lord is my Shepherd, I'll not want. Amen.