

The Shepherd's Voice

(Preached at Footscray Baptist Church on May 3rd, 2020 by Cheryl Williams– Psalm 23 & John 10:1-10)

What do you know about sheep? If you are like me you only know about the wool they provide, that you knit up. We have been told haven't we that they are stupid, running around a paddock following each other. If you are like my friend you will have stories of bringing home lambs that have been separated from their mothers, stories of naming them and of finding them on the roadside and looking after them. If you listen to the stories in the gospel, we learn that sheep are not stupid, not for a moment. They know the ones who have what is best for them in store.

The hearers and readers of Psalm 23 and of John's gospel were quite familiar with sheep. King David, the author (we think) of the 23rd Psalm had been a shepherd as a young boy. The work of a shepherd was exacting, dangerous and needed skill. Those who were shepherds were marginalised by society. Shepherds would provide their sheep with food and water (good pasture and still waters), lead them out to such and provide safety for them.

David had gone from one who cared for the sheep, helped them find pasture on which to feed, protected them, to one who understood God to be like a shepherd, even after all his trials and tribulations.

In the Hebrew Bible, kings as good shepherds are contrasted with kings as bad shepherds based on how they dealt with injustice and how they understood themselves in relation to God.

So, throughout the bible sheep and tending sheep is used in metaphor, parable and story. Jesus does the same. He would have been familiar with this history and these stories as he told parables about lost sheep, about sheepfolds, gatekeepers and shepherds.

In our reading from John we find Jesus describing himself as the gate for the sheep. Later in the chapter he will describe himself as the shepherd.

First, a little bit about sheepfolds and sheep. Sheepfolds provided protection for the flock at night. The sheep would be protected from thieves or bandits. The sheep could huddle together for warmth. During the day they would be led out (not driven out) to find pasture, to places of nourishment and sustenance, to places of water and calmness, to places of play and freedom.

The way out to green pasture, still waters and nourishment, was through the gate. The way in to safety, warmth and comfort, was through the gate. The gate, not over the fence.

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It was the gatekeeper who provided access to the sheep via the gate. The gatekeeper knows who the legitimate one, the one who will care for the sheep is. The gatekeeper let's them in to lead the sheep in and out. The gatekeeper also knows who wishes the sheep harm and does not let them in or out.

The one the gatekeeper lets in is the one whom the sheep follow. The sheep for their part, do not hesitate, in following the one they trust, the one who leads and helps them find all they need for survival, all they need for life, abundant life. The one who gives them all the need – protection, care, guidance, nourishment and as people in my field of chaplaincy would say – a non-anxious presence. The one they follow is attentive, compassionate, watchful and takes notice on their behalf.

The sheep are called by name, they respond to the one they know, the one who is familiar to them. The sheep know the one who offers them sanctuary.

The sheep are led, they are not driven from behind or herded out, they are led.

We are the sheep of the fold, Jesus is the gate and Jesus is the good shepherd.

Jesus calls us by name.

Jesus is the one we follow because we know him.

Jesus is the one leading us to places of abundance, of abundant life. He provides us with places where we find sustenance and nourishment, places of calm, places of safety, places of warmth.

In this time of isolation what does abundance look like?ⁱ What is your nourishment? Where is your safe place? Where are your still waters – your places of calm and serenity? Is it times of prayer? Is it in enjoying the silence? Is it in reading – the bible or other writings? Is it in hearing more and more birds singing? Is it in smelling the roses and bringing them inside to enjoy? Is it in getting your hands dirty in the garden? Is it in being creative – playing with words, listening to music, working with textiles?

Our challenge is not only to enjoy and bask in what the Good Shepherd provides, but also to be good shepherds to those around us.

To provide sustenance for others.

To bring others with us back into the sheepfold, where there is no pecking order, all are equally loved, protected and kept warm.

To be the gentle voice that welcomes and cares about others.

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To be the voice for those who are experiencing harm, who are slipping through the cracks, who are at risk of being victims of bandits and subterfuge.

To share life in its abundance, all that is the gift of the Good Shepherd.

To think about who needs care in this time of crisis is important. Who is slipping through cracks in the system? Who is without work? Who is without income? Who does not have the basic necessities of life – shelter, safety, the homeless, the refugee, the elderly, those with mental health issues, those of us with cabin fever.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

He calls his sheep (us) by name.

We respond to his voice and his leading.

He came so all might have life and have it abundantly.

May we know this to be true. May we continue to hear the voice of Jesus leading. May we follow him to green pastures, calming waters and abundant life, always, but especially in this moment. Amen.

¹ This idea comes from Rev Rachel Kronberger (Yarraville Uniting Church) in her Youtube 'With Thankful Hearts'