

Easter 4
17/04/2005

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 2:42-47
Psalm 23
1 Peter 2:19-25
John 10:1-10

The shepherd and the gate

This is Good Shepherd Sunday. The scriptures contain many references to sheep, shepherds and shepherding. Good shepherding is epitomised by Psalm 23, while in Chapter 10 of John's Gospel Jesus is named as the Good Shepherd. But there are other images that are negative. The prophet Ezekiel berated the leaders of Israel who did not care properly for the sheep. They followed their own interests and even grew fat on the flock. This is relevant because the first 10 verses of John Chapter 10 are not really about good shepherding. They are a commentary on Chapter 9 in which there has been a controversy between Jesus and the leaders of Israel over his healing of a man blind from birth. In the conflict that followed his healing the man was rejected and thrown out of the synagogue. The leaders - the shepherds - were revealed as being closed to a new example of the mercy of God. They were guilty of running things according to their own agenda, the result of which was the scattering the sheep in the form of the man they threw out.

The two figures of speech at the beginning of Chapter 10 comment on the poor shepherding of the traditional leaders. The first figure pictures two parties who enter the sheepfold, an exploiter and a shepherd. The challenge is, how to recognize which of the two is real. The clue is found in seeing what happens to the sheep - have they been gathered and cared for, or have they been injured and scattered? In terms of the preceding story, there is no doubt. The man blind from birth was brought to life by Jesus, but he was ostracized by home and synagogue. John's message is that Jesus' voice is that of the Shepherd of Israel, and people will find life in his name. But he was dealt with as if he was a usurper of the flock.

The second figure of speech represents Jesus as the gate to the fold. This is the image reflected in the graphic on our Order of Service. Every group of people has gatekeepers. Some are officially appointed - to write the letters, count the money, welcome the people and generally take care of the life of the fold. But in any group there are others who gate keep in a different, often unofficial way. They stand for certain values and opinions and resist particular sorts of changes. They may operate as thought police, or they may subtly discourage new people from joining the group, on the basis that they think they won't fit in. But this sort of gate keeping is usually conducted in the interest of the gatekeepers, not the people seeking to enter. When Jesus says he is the gate of the sheep, he is saying that the effect of his work is that people join the flock of God. They enter through comprehending his tone, benefitting from his feeding, and his healing friendship. His gatekeeping is ultimately interested in the wellbeing of the sheep, rather than the well being of the Shepherd, and his help is often given without being sought. In him we see expressed the essential, outgoing, merciful, nature of God. And we know it by its effects.

When texts like this come up, it is always interesting to reflect on what else is

happening around us. Last week there was held a professional ethics seminar for ministers. The aim was to refresh our understanding of the importance of maintaining a proper respect for the people of the church, and for colleagues in ministry.

And next week we commence our series of studies on Ordination. The Church's thinking about which begins with an understanding of the community of faith, brought together by God the Shepherd. In the New Testament Jesus is the Good Shepherd. To be shepherded by him is to have company in the dark places, to have peace and rest from one's burdens. It is to be brought back from going astray, to have found one's place, and it is to be directed to a deeper purpose in life.

We understand that just as God delegated to Jesus the responsibility of gathering and caring for the people of earth, so does Jesus, in the power of the Spirit through the church, delegate to Ministers a role reflective of his own. As we shall see, Ministers become shepherds, not by their own choosing, but by the gracious calling of the Great Shepherd of the Sheep, in whom is summed up everything that is meant by the pastoral ministry.

To be a shepherd in the style of Jesus is to be a guardian of the sheep. It is to oversee their safety and stability and ensure they receive their proper food. That means hearing the Word, being fed by the Sacraments, being cared for through fellowship and having their life deepened by prayer. Such Shepherding calls for many things: courage to enter the darkest of places with and for others. It requires patience, humility, a clear sense of order, and an ability to deal with frustration. It involves having competence in the calling, and the unusual ability to find joy in works of self-denial. This is really counter-cultural. The Shepherd is not a self-seeker or self-promoter. In a world like ours this is a costly role to undertake, but it is no less important for that. Without this role, properly exercised, there is danger of damage or ruin for the church.

In the four weeks to come we will think a lot more about what it means to be members of the flock, and what is the role of the Ordained amongst us. But the last thing for us to reflect on here is, what does it mean to listen to the voice of our Shepherd, rather than to the voice of strangers, or to the sound of our own way of doing things? It takes practice to recognise the tones of the voice of the one who calls us. Daily we confront many predicaments, in our own lives, and in the life of the church and the community. We battle with the cultural ethos, and the web of influences that surround us in an almost unrecognized way. Consider how our leaders have taken to appearing in churches and using religious language. Is this a reflection of the Good Shepherd or a cynical exploitation of an opportunity to gather some sheep to their cause? We know well how people in past times have lost their lives following the promise of leaders who turned out to be wolves in sheep's clothing - Stalin, Mussolini, Hitler and names nearer to our time - deathly beings who ruined life for many individuals and communities. Why people followed such leaders, and still seek them, must have something to do with a deep hunger within us to be shepherded. And although we might think there is no shepherding going on for us, consider the all-pervasive media, the Internet, and the voices we listen to almost without thinking and from which we take cues for our daily living. All our shepherds are fallible and in a fallen world there is no such thing as untainted shepherding. But what is Good Shepherding that we might seek it?

Our text today does not indicate what the goodness of the Shepherd consists of, but later we learn that it is centred on Jesus' willingness to lay down his life for the sheep. This is supremely what it means to live according to agendas not of one's own making. Agendas that arise from faithfulness to God, and have as their focus life in abundance

for others. Ears that are tuned for the voice of this Shepherd will recognize that it speaks in tones of gentleness, inclusion and sacrifice. It is the sound of such a voice that we seek to guide us. That is why those who follow this voice will find it difficult to support calls for the ostracism of those who are different. Or for a plan to engage in national or global actions that profit on one part of the community at the expense of another. Or which, in the national interest, plunders or exploits the weak and vulnerable because caring for them as they need now is judged to be too costly.