

**Easter 4**  
**29/4/2012**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Acts 4:5 - 12**

**Psalm 23**

**I John 3:16 – 24**

**John 10:10 - 31**

**The Good Shepherd**

Sermon preached by Rev Dr Morag Logan

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Of all of the imagery used biblically, and there is a great deal, I would argue that the imagery used in the gospels today is one that poses us the greatest problem. It is so hard for us to hear this imagery with power and freshness, for so many reasons.

In part we have so many associations with this imagery that we need to let go of. From stained glass windows, and children's illustrated bible – filled with peaceful, sunlit, green white and blue images of pastures and kindly shepherds nursing cute lambs – from this to a lot of our musical associations which to me are with pastorals and peaceful interludes, restful interludes in the bucolic countryside. All of this imagery surrounding sheep and shepherds is romantic, peaceful, idyllic, full of images of health and wellbeing, of soft gentle, fluffy white lambs, gently cared for by a loving shepherd.

Of course, this has little to do with the reality of sheep, especially sheep in Australia, at the present. Here, in Australia, we should, if our dreams reflect our reality, we should think of immense flocks - so large that any individual is totally insignificant. The world of agribusiness, of flocks in thousands, "shepherds" in helicopters overseeing large amounts of countryside; of sheep essentially safe, managed in bulk.

Both of these images – the romance and the reality – get in the way of a real understanding of the biblical imagery, at least as it probably was intended in its original form. We have to set these images aside.

However, even with this done, other problems intrude into our thinking about this image. The emotional attachments of Psalm 23 – reminders of major funerals to many of us can be a part of it. But the major problem, to me, is that there are some very uncomfortable aspects to this imagery. We are not comfortable with the association between ourselves, and sheep. A lot of our associations with sheep are fairly uncomfortable applied to us. Sheep, for example are not noted for their intelligence; for their capacity for creative and individual thinking. It is also true that a number of other important traits are significantly lacking in our thinking about sheep: independence; strength; fortitude; individuality – all are important things we are unwilling to forego; but which are notably absent in sheep, which makes this a difficult imagery for us to appropriate for ourselves, as thinking, pro-active adults, and this is perhaps why we have relegated this imagery to the world of stain-glass imagery, children's bibles; the Sunday school.

The world of sheep and shepherds in Israel is very different to our world, our thinking. Ancient flocks were small holdings, managed by an individual, or a few individuals. Each individual animal would be individually known by the shepherd. Each animal was of great value to the owner: numbers in the flocks were a sign of wealth and prosperity – think of Job before (and then after) the disaster, or the families of Abraham and Lot, striving to make good, to survive, to prosper meant the struggle to increase your flock.

The ancient shepherd of Palestine or Asia Minor had to be tough, worked often in areas of sparse growth, of wilderness. Frequently, there were dangers from wild animals, like wolves, lions and bears; and there were dangers from other people - sheep stealers. Above all, the shepherds had to protect the flock, especially at night, when they would often be rounded up together into a small pen – both more vulnerable and more easily protected. John 10 reflects this less than idyllic world. The bland, benign images we carry, as well as the agribusiness that we are used to both give way to a picture of tension: positively, that of a shepherd doing his job to the utmost; negatively, that of dangers which threaten the sheep (in the present and the future) and the shepherd, dangers which will kill him. In this passage life and death dance together, where the celebrated verse 10: ‘I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly’ is what leads on to: ‘The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep’ (verse 11). But the death of the shepherd here is not defeat. Our passage ends with Jesus saying; ‘I lay down my life in order that I might take it up again’ (verse 17). The previous verse also holds promise: there are going to be other sheep. Here we have the familiar Johannine theme: through Jesus’ death, exaltation and return to the Father, a new chapter will open. He will draw all peoples to himself.

The shepherd was a common image in the Ancient Near East used for rulers, from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia to Israel. It reflected both versatile strength and nurture. It was an image, in fact, of an engaged leadership, a personal leadership, a leadership where the leader put himself at risk. The greatest king of Israel’s memory, King David, was a shepherd in his childhood. Given how much of an idea David was, these stories, together with the slaying of the giant Goliath which follows from the skills David gained protecting his sheep, all of these stories could easily all be legendary; it fits so well with the imagery of the surrounding nations, the imagery of the ideal king. Ezekiel complains about the ‘shepherds of Israel’, their failure to care for the sheep (Ezekiel 34). The assumption in the ancient world is that government; religious and political leadership both have a caring role.

The passage that we read from John’s gospel appears to focus more on leadership within the community of faith. Its imagery is in places overworked. Earlier in the chapter, it is not clear whether Jesus is the one who comes in by the gate, or the gate itself. Nonetheless, it sharply criticized the failure Israel’s spiritual leaders and attacks those who are in ministry for the job and not as a calling. The latter will hopefully be ‘professional’ in the sense of thorough, efficient and disciplined, but the assumption of the passage is that people just hired to do the job without personal commitment will not be prepared to lead in the dangers. They are out to keep their flocks safe, protected and docile, but will not have the staying power when there are risks and dangers.

Some of our struggle remains. In this imagery, the shepherd and the sheep remain very unequal, there is no escaping this, however much the passage ameliorates it, through the attempt to give the sheep more autonomy, when the author speaks of the sheep recognising only the true shepherd (10:14). At the level of human interaction, this acknowledges responsibility, not just on the part of leadership, but also on the part of the community. What kind of leadership do we want? This makes an attempt to point to the shared responsibility we have for the survival of the community, nonetheless, there is an uncomfortable inequality here that remains going against the grain for us,

The vision of other flocks of sheep doubtless points forward to the expansion of the gospel beyond Israel to Gentiles. Such references, heard in the community of John's gospel, would have the effect of bringing recognition to the Gentile members of the congregation. Part of caring is to be concerned about unity: one flock, one shepherd. Unity is another important theme here. One of the best ways of achieving it is to ensure people remain committed to the life which the shepherd brings, to the calling we all share.

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. For some, various images of atonement come flooding in at this point: and the imagery can become mixed and confused: the good shepherd becoming the sacrificial lamb. Images of atonement may be a helpful, but I think that we should see that it is not really what John is talking about. Rather John is referring to Jesus' being prepared to face danger and death for the sake of his disciples. Attractive though these connections may be, this not about theories of atonement. His commission the command to him was to come offering life. This he did. Carrying that through faithfully meant being prepared to die for it. This he did. This happened in the light of the larger goal: so that he could take up his life again and then, through the Spirit, spread it over all the world, to bring life to the whole world.

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