

Easter 4
15/05/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 2:42 – 47
Psalm 23
1 Peter 2:18 - 25
John 10:1 - 10

Good and Bad Shepherds

This is Good Shepherd Sunday and although this is an image rich in symbolism, it has been a temptation for the church to think that because we live in an urban, technological environment the image of the Shepherd and the sheep has no further relevance to us. One preacher [Pridmore, *The Word...* p 40] remembers that during sixties the attempt to find industrial substitutes for the image resulted in: “The Lord is my crankshaft, everything revolves around him”. It is a salutary reminder of how our attempts to do the same might look in five or fifty years time. There may be a wide gap between the imagery of our texts and our current life-style, but real power may yet emerge from these symbols if we are prepared to wrestle with the meaning of our life together with God in Christ of which they speak.

The Good Shepherd, as associated with the Vicar of Dibley, may seem a soft option, but the context of John 10 suggests otherwise. The section we read today really begins in Chapter 9, which is devoted entirely to the story of how Jesus restored the sight of a blind man who, because he was born blind, was regarded as a victim of unforgivable sin. Jesus’ action of bringing sight and faith to the man, and then seeking him out to care for him when he was ostracized, provoked a vigorous argument with the religious leaders who believed such action was sinful, even blasphemous.

Chapter 10 teaches the difference between true shepherds who nurture and care for the flock, and bad shepherds, life stealers who have evil intent towards the community of faith. As the Chapter continues Jesus presses harder on the image of the Good Shepherd, and the religious leaders begin to plot his death. Jesus’ shepherding turned out to be a dangerous business, which is why the Letter of Peter, with its reference to the Suffering servant, is read on this day. Because there are good and bad shepherds, those who give life and those who steal life, it becomes crucial which voice you listen to, and by which gate you enter the community.

Jesus pictures himself as the gate of the sheepfold. This is an allegory in which a material thing becomes something relational. In saying he is the gate, Jesus makes the relationship between himself and God the key, which opens the door to the Kingdom. Because Jesus’ voice speaks in the language of self-giving, life empowering love we are right to conclude that key to this door is shaped like a cross. But we know from the Gospels that many wanted no part of God’s offer of abundant life and did not hear in Jesus’ voice a divine summons to the banquet of life. Discernment is called for. Be careful whom you listen to, and which gate you choose. In John choosing occurs in the overarching context of God’s will and intent to draw the whole world into a flock that enjoys the nourishment of abundant life. This gift of divine love is a deep seated, all embracing frame of reference in John who wrote his gospel for one purpose: that people would find life in Jesus’ name. With him it is always possible to move from darkness to light, from death to life.

The image of sheep and shepherd connects with our understanding of pastoral leadership in congregational life. Sheep are unambiguously people: members of a community of faith who are sought out, gathered in and nourished in such a way that they thrive. Shepherds are meant to be agents of life, who do not abuse or misuse the flock. Their mentor is Jesus whose life of self-giving, grounded in God's choice to love the world, is the source and pattern of our vision of ministry, and for our life together.

In the world as we know it the church is called to live from this vision, in its worship and its mission, and in its relationships outside the community of faith. If we are serious about this we are likely to encounter tension between the kind of shepherding that works for life, and the kind that steals the gift of life. We don't need reminding how our people are robbed of life, through violence, and through threats to human rights and dignity, acts of discrimination and the refusal to forgive, all of which crucify impulses towards peace and reconciliation.

Yet, our texts call us to allow ourselves to be shepherded by one whose life giving voice, though silenced when he gave his life for the sheep, lives amongst us in memory and hope. This is the voice we are called to follow in the church, and in the world. And the tones in which it speaks to us means we will ourselves embody his resistance to the way the world does things. We will seek ways of supporting voices that name the places where negative spirit is in charge: killing off life and creating division - perhaps using religiously plausible language in the process. If we indeed listen for the voice of our shepherd and take on the character of him who is our gate to life, we cannot stand aside from the need to speak to power about the suffering of others. And we may suffer for doing so.

As the latest plans for Australia's treatment of Asylum Seekers has been debated this week, it struck me that those who listen to the voice of him who offers abundant life will naturally seek a different solution to the problem than the ones presently on the table: the Malaysian Solution, and the human warehouse proposed for Manus Island. Even if our Government refused to respond to the challenge of religious values, it needs to be reminded that it is committed to the United Nations Convention on Human Rights, which means it concurs with the principles of safeguarding the human dignity of those seeking refuge particularly in respect of their safety, legal status, right to shelter and access to proper medical care. The Malaysian solution smacks of bad shepherding. It removes a problem from our sight, but without guaranteeing the safety or wellbeing of those shipped off shore. It effectively uses human trafficking as a way of denying the care we are obliged to give to those seeking refuge amongst us [cf Andrew Hamilton]. What are we afraid of that we go to such lengths?

Currently there is a large community of men being detained in Weipa. Someone who recently visited that detention centre spoke about the experience. The picture that emerged is that in the effort to keep people out of Australia, expense is no object, either to establish such facilities, or to pay to run them. How different it would be if these resources were set free to house feed and support people in community as they negotiate their right to stay in Australian and take up life as citizens amongst us, as many before have done, to our great enrichment. In our effort to maintain abundant life while refusing to share it with others who seek our help, we are establishing an unsavoury reputation for ourselves that, in the long haul of history may well repay us a negative dividend.

The letter of Peter speaks of religious leadership as the “guardianship of souls”: it refers to shepherding, ruling and feeding the flock, as an expression of the ministry of Christ among us. There is a real sense in which every minister is a “guardian of souls” – someone who sees the people of God in their care as people of dignity, worthy of respect and support, entitled to the opportunity to live and thrive in the goodness of God. Every congregation participates in this guardianship, through the ministry of Elders and through ministries of care in the community. And there is an equal sense in which, because of the grace we have received, every congregation is called to be a guardian of the souls of the community. Because of what it knows about Good Shepherding, it will be concerned about bad shepherding, whether in church or community.

That is why it will support those who are unfairly treated and find ways to speak up for and support, those whom others disdain. It will protest about those who oppress and detain other human beings in circumstances that are less than worthy of our heritage of faith, or even our heritage in secular, human values.
