

**A sermon at the funeral of Norma Beatrice Gallacher née Woolhouse.  
Mark the Evangelist Uniting Church @ St Mary's, North Melbourne; 24/8/23.**

**2 Corinthians 4:16-18**

**Psalm 121**

**John 10:11-15, 27-30**

Sermon preached by Rev. Em. Prof. Robert Gribben

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Jn 10<sup>11</sup> [Jesus said,] *'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.'*

And the verse before it, which we didn't hear:

<sup>10</sup> *'I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.'*

When we read John's Gospel, we are aware that it has a different scope. As we say on one of our Uniting Church prayers at the Table, *'In time beyond our dreaming, you brought forth life out of darkness, and in the love of Christ your Son you set man and woman at the heart of your creation.'* So begins the work of the Trinity of love.

And the stories he tells are not so much about events in Jesus's life as reflections on the meaning of that life, that death, that rising in glory from the cross. They are, as he says, *'signs... that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name'*. (20:31)

One of the signs is Jesus's testimony, 'I am the Good Shepherd'.

You may like to have Norma's ikon on the front of the service booklet where you can see it.

Between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, it was the main image of God in human form, then it largely disappeared but is now universal. I suppose it was a familiar sight in ancient Palestine; indeed, there are statues from pagan times of a beardless youth with a lamb slung around his neck which might have provided a model. (Sheep in their time were smaller than ours!) I'm not good at dating sheep, but Norma's one is, I think, still young, and Jesus – the mature Jesus with a beard – is holding it firmly.



The halo forms the shape of a cross around the head, and you can see the marks of the nails in his hands. *'The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep'*.

And since you're looking, you can see the letters O and N, by which the icon-writers identified the principal figures. The O at the top is for 'the', and another O (Ω) hidden under the lamb on the left side, and N on the right, form the Greek word for 'Being', Existence Itself, and translates the Hebrew I AM - so there you have our text.

Jesus, after all, was not a shepherd, even when young, and on the whole in the Bible, shepherds get a pretty bad press. They may be wolves who attack the flock. Ezekiel in particular goes to town, calling them thieves and robbers 'who do not care for the sheep'.

But the addition of the adjective 'Good' to 'Shepherd' takes the matter right out of an agricultural context. The Roman and English traditions which paint Jesus cuddling a lamb with little children at his feet in a flowery field have missed the point. It is not meant to convey a family-friendly, sentimental image to make us feel warm inside.

At the centre of this passage is the One 'who lays his life down for the sheep'. In all the references to shepherds throughout Scripture, none goes this far. This shepherd goes even beyond the mere 'good'. And it is saying something else: this goodness is not human virtue; it is divine, it is of the essence of God. The combination of 'shepherd' and 'good' should have been a shock to its first hearers.

The evangelist is saying something important about Jesus. The human divisions and conflicts in the earlier verses are set aside. This shepherd *knows* his flock, and the word 'know' means to know intimately, knows *every one* of the flock and knows them thoroughly (or in the old use of the word, 'thoroughly', through and through). And the flock knows their shepherd, just as thoughtfully.

This is exactly how St John speaks of Jesus's relationship to his Abba, Father. And he goes on to offer the same intimacy to us: '*I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup>just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.*'

And amidst of the babble and noise that surrounds *us* - more than a shepherd ever knew - we know him by his voice.

*<sup>27</sup>My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.'*

I looked at dozens of Good Shepherd ikons in my preparation. They come in all shapes and sizes, all comfortably settled, half-awake, gazing nowhere.

This is where Norma's ikon has a surprise.

This is a lamb that *knows*, knows her keeper (Ps 121) and knows she is held. Her eye is unwaveringly intent on the Good Shepherd. I think that is a detail unique to Norma's ikon.

For he has heard her voice too and has come, picked her up and carried her, he, the holy One, the I AM.

*'I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.'* (John 10: 28)

So [as St Paul wrote] *we do not lose heart.*' (2 Cor. 4:16).

Into that loving, life-keeping embrace, we entrust our beloved Norma.

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