

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

3rd May 2020 – Fourth Sunday of Easter

JOHN 10:11-18

THE LOVING SHEPHERD

If God had hired a marketing or PR company to get His message across, whoever came up with the idea of using the image of a shepherd with his sheep should have been paid a huge bonus! As a symbol it is possibly bigger and even more recognisable than things like the yellow arches of McDonald's, or the white writing on a red background of Coca Cola. Psalm 23's opening words of, 'The Lord is my Shepherd', and Jesus' claim to be, 'The Good Shepherd', are so well known that even people who aren't Christian often know this image; how many times, for example, do you hear these words at even at a non-Christian funeral? There is a good chance that you have a picture of the Good Shepherd at home. It is an image which is not just well known, but also much loved, bringing comfort at times of trial, or sickness, or death. When we need God's help, care and protection, it is the image of the Good Shepherd, the One who lays down His life for the sheep, that we so often turn to.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, our Gospel reading for this Good Shepherd Sunday, a day which also includes Psalm 23, which, if you like, is where it all began. We know that King David, the writer of Psalm 23, had been a shepherd as a young boy, and that it was his responsibility to take his father's sheep out each day, to find those green pastures and still waters for them, and to keep them safe from bears, wolves and lions which might attack them. David himself told King Saul before killing Goliath that in the same way God helped him to use his sling to kill all those wild animals which threatened his father's sheep, God would help him defeat Goliath. And God did. And then later, when that young shepherd boy became the king of God's people, David wrote this well-known Psalm to describe the love and care that God gives to His people. And it's no surprise, or coincidence, that

now Jesus uses this same image, calling Himself the Good Shepherd, the One who lays down His life for the sheep, bringing back so strongly the image that King David used.

Why do we love this image so much? Why do we find it so comforting? Why does it so easily pass across time, culture, even languages? What is it for you about this image that is so special? Just stop to have a think about that. For many of us it is probably the image which comes into my head each time I think of these words: the picture of Jesus holding a young lamb. In that picture I see protection. In that picture I see comfort. In that picture I see each one of us held in the arms of the One who can carry us through any thing we face. In that picture I see that, like sheep, we can sometimes go off on our own way, but that no matter what we do Jesus comes after us and brings us back to Him. In the picture of the Good Shepherd, we see the One who will do whatever He can to keep us safe and close to the Father, even willingly giving up His life for us. A picture which brings peace and comfort, even in the toughest times.

And all of this is because when Jesus talks about Himself in this Gospel reading as the Good Shepherd, He is not saying that like it is a job description, but that it is a relationship. In the first place it is about His relationship with the Father, a relationship of love and obedience in which He will do all that the Father has sent Him to do, which is to do what is needed to save us. And then, it is about His relationship with us; a relationship of love and care, of acceptance of each one of us, of a concern which means He won't let us go through anything alone. A relationship in which we are His, and from His side nothing will ever change that.

As much as we might look at the 'Good Shepherd' as being a strong Christian symbol, it is so much more than that. It is even more than a description of God's love for us. It *is* God's love for us. It has comforted us many times over the years and continues to do so today. Jesus is our Good Shepherd; the One who died for us and rose again, the One who does all He can to keep us in the Father's love. As sheep who do often stray and go our own way, may we continue to listen to His voice as He calls us to Him. Amen.

Prayer: Let's pray; Heavenly Father, thank you for sending Jesus to be our Good Shepherd. Through Your love and the power of Your Spirit help us always to stay close to You and in Your care and protection. Amen.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION:

You are now invited, either alone or with those around you, to further discuss and reflect on some of the points and themes from this reading:

1. A Well-Known and Well-Loved Image

Psalm 23, the Lord is My Shepherd, and this reading in John 10 where Jesus calls Himself, The Good Shepherd, are such well-known images of the Christian faith.

- Reflect alone or share with those you are with: why is it do you think that this image is so important to people? Is it a special image to you, and, if so, what do you focus on when you think of it?
- Are there any other images in the Bible which give you a strong sense of God's love, forgiveness, or peace?

2. The 'I Am' sayings of Jesus

In the Gospels there are number of times when Jesus says, 'I Am ...'. This has a strong connection with Exodus chapter three, where, when Moses asks God who he shall say is sending him, God replies, 'I Am who I Am'. A link is then made between God the Father and Jesus the Son and the way they both describe themselves.

- What other 'I Am' sayings of Jesus can you name?
- Do you have a favourite among these sayings? If so, explain why that one is special to you.
- If you have the opportunity, take some time to look up these sayings up in the Bible, and think about what Jesus is saying to us when He uses each one.

3. The Shepherd Gives Up His Life for the Sheep

In this reading Jesus describes Himself as, ‘ I am the good shepherd, and the good shepherd gives up his life for his sheep.’ *John 10:11 CEV* Reflect back on the Easter story which we heard again just a few weeks ago.

- What parts of the Easter story come to your mind when you reflect on this description Jesus gives Himself?
- As you think about this, how does this move you to respond to this great love?

4. Listen to the Voice of the Shepherd

The image of God as the shepherd and we as the sheep is strong throughout the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. The image often is sung in songs, from classic hymns to contemporary children’s songs.

- As sheep who often stray, what things take us away from God? They could be fears or worries which drive us away, or distractions which cause us to stop thinking about Him. What sometimes takes you away from the Shepherd?
- What does the Shepherd use to bring you back to Him? Like a modern farmer does He chase you on motorbike and send a dog to nip at your heels, or does He lovingly and gently lead you? How does He do this?

Pastor Andrew Koehler

2.5.20