

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

30th April 2023 – Fourth Sunday of Easter

John 10:11-18

LOVING SACRIFICE

‘To lay down one’s life for others in the ultimate sacrifice’. When you hear words like that, what do you think of? If you try and forget that today we are talking about the Good Shepherd, you may think of them as words which are said about service men and women who gave up their lives in service to their country; they are the kind of words which we heard again just this week as we commemorated ANZAC Day. And in thinking about that, what kinds of words or images come to mind for us? Sacrifice, devotion, selflessness, love, service, dedication. As we this week stopped again to rightly remember both those who served and those who made the ultimate sacrifice, we remembered the thankfulness and gratitude we owe those who gave so much so that we can live the lives which we now live. The service and devotion they showed in the past, no matter how long ago, still has a very big impact on how we live our lives today.

To lay down one’s life for others. What else does that make you think of? That is of course also what we can say about Jesus, particularly as we look today at this well-known and loved image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. We know that the picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, or God as the Shepherd, is very well-known and loved by many people, even those who don’t have much other knowledge about the Christian faith. When I am sitting down with people who don’t have much to do with church to plan a wedding or a funeral, it is pretty much guaranteed that they will pick Psalm 23 as the Psalm they want in the service. And thinking about it, that’s a good thing, thank God that if they don’t know much else about God they know that; that He is a loving Shepherd who cares for them, especially in their time of need.

‘The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want’. ‘I am the good shepherd, and the good shepherd gives us His life for the sheep’. Well known, and loved, words, aren’t they? What do they make you think of? Probably similar to the thoughts and feelings we have in relation to those who gave their lives

for our country; sacrifice, devotion, dedication, service, selflessness. Both the image of God as our Shepherd who leads us beside still waters and takes us to green grass, and who with His staff keeps away all that threatens us, and Jesus as the Good Shepherd who draws us all to Him and lays down His life for the sheep, they are both images of God's love for us which we turn to especially at those times when we do need His strength in our lives. They remind us that God in His love is always there for us, watching over us, caring for us.

Apart from the image of the cross itself, this Shepherd image, which is in both the Old and New Testaments, is maybe the one we most closely identify with in our faith. I've shared before that I have a small, framed picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd which my great-grandmother gave to me long before I can remember. Throughout my growing up years it was by my bed, and now it sits on my office desk. We treasure this image of God and what it says about our relationship with Him.

And in this Gospel reading Jesus explains why this image means so much to us, and why it is so important for us. After calling Himself the 'Good Shepherd', He says, 'Hired workers are not like the shepherd. They don't own the sheep, and when they see a wolf coming, they run off and leave the sheep. Then the wolf attacks and scatters the flock. Hired workers run away because they don't care about the sheep.' (v. 12-13) Jesus is the Good Shepherd because He gives His life for the sheep, and because He knows the sheep, in other words, He has a relationship with us.

So, without us always thinking about it, perhaps this image of Jesus as Good Shepherd has more layers and significance than we often consider for it. It is not just about what He does in giving His life for us, as much as we love that and as important as it is, it's about the relationship He has with us. This relationship means that, unlike the hired workers He talks about here, Jesus goes the whole way, He gives His life for us, He makes the loving sacrifice. Jesus doesn't just talk about making that ultimate sacrifice, but as we celebrated just a few weeks ago at Easter, He did it.

The reasons why this shepherd image is so relevant and meaningful for us, isn't only about what the Shepherd did, but because of His relationship to us. It's a relationship which Jesus describes as being as close as the relationship He has with His Father, in other words, a bond which from His side is

unbreakable. And it is in us having this relationship, practicing this relationship, that we experience what having the Shepherd in our lives means for us. Rather than just pulling Him out like a genie in a bottle when we are sad, worried, and the bad or hard times come, the relationship He wants with us, and which we benefit from having with Him, is the one which is there all the time. That means reading and hearing from the Bible God's promises of love for us when things are going well and the sun is shining for us, as well as turning to them when we walk through those dark valleys. It means talking to God in prayer at all times, about all things, the things we are happy about, thankful for, looking forward to, as well as those we need His help and strength to face. How often do we pray during a day to thank God for something, compared to the number of times we offer up a spontaneous prayer asking for help? (I know which one I do often, and which I hardly ever do!) To live in the loving sacrifice of Jesus, is to know and experience that loving relationship He has with us each day, not just when we feel that we need it.

We also know that a relationship is two sided, don't we? A relationship exists not just because of what we receive, but also how we respond to that. And perhaps we don't always look at our relationship with our Good Shepherd like this. We like the comfort and the strength this image gives us, of the One who loves us so much He gave His life for us, but what about how we are called to respond? Loving sacrifice is what we receive, but it is also what we are called to give. How does that look for us? How selfless and self-giving are we in how we respond to the needs of others, accept them, forgive them, seek to understand them, protect and care for them? Are there ways you can be more self-giving in these areas? As the sheep in His flock, we are now called to be the shepherds for Jesus here on earth, to share His love, to show people in how we live our lives both what He means to us and the difference He can make in their life also. When Jesus says, 'I have other sheep that are not in this sheep pen. I must also bring them together, when they hear my voice' (v. 16b), we are a part of what He is talking about. People hear His voice in what they see and hear in us. People are brought to Him in how He works through us. We don't just have a relationship with the Shepherd ourselves, but we are a part of His leading others to have that relationship with Him also.

Jesus said, 'I am the good shepherd, and the good shepherd gives up his life for his sheep.' (v.

11) This much-loved image for us all is such a great image of God's love and what it means in our lives, a love which comes out in the loving sacrifice of Jesus giving up His life for us. It's an image which shows both the relationship we have with God, and the relationship He calls us to have with Him. It also calls us to live out this sacrifice so that others can know what it means in their lives also. Take comfort and strength, and find your calling, in the One who in His loving sacrifice truly shows Himself to be our Good Shepherd. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

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.

- why do you think 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?

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 in the Bible, and think about what Jesus is saying to us when He uses each one.

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?

Pray: Thank God for the images of the Shepherd we have in the Bible, and the peace and assurance they provide to so many people. Ask God to help us to stay close to our Shepherd, and not to go off wandering away from Him. Pray for those who don't know Jesus as their loving Shepherd, or who have gone away from Him. Bring before the Shepherd any needs of yourself or any people you know.

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