

Sermon – Easter 4

John 10: 11-18, Psalm 23

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Well, as we come here to worship and share at the Lord's table, our readings today are loaded with metaphor and imagery about God and our relationship with God. And this has also been picked up by our Gradual hymn which provided us with even more visual cues. Our first reading from Acts describes Jesus as the cornerstone of our faith and that of the church. Then the much loved, and even iconic Psalm 23 follows, with the metaphor of the Lord as Shepherd and the images of green pastures and still waters, of hospitality and healing, and ending with:

“Surely your goodness and loving kindness shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Such comforting words as we remember our dear friends June and Cynthia. The theme of love is also the dominant theme of our 2nd reading from the First Letter of John and then our Gospel reading further develops the metaphor of the Good Shepherd. So today, amongst this wealth of imagery and themes, I want to explore that of the Good Shepherd and how Love is the main game that surfaces from Christ's ministry. And this is very good and appropriate for us, as we continue to celebrate that Jesus Christ has risen in this Easter season.

Well, I had the privilege and the pleasure of going to Israel in January. And our pilgrimage followed the course of Jesus' life, starting most fittingly in Bethlehem, with a Eucharist held in a cave in the surrounding hills at the Franciscan shrine of the Shepherd's Field. As we wandered, after the service, amongst the ruins of an ancient monastery, we noticed a shepherd further down the slope, gently leading his small flock, of around half a dozen grazing sheep, around the hill. This was in stark contrast to the concrete urban development on the hill on the other side of the valley. I reflected on this picture and realized that it was also in contrast to the image I had, in my Australian mind, of shepherding, which involved much larger herds, even hundreds of sheep, Landrovers and kelpies, and a lot of noise!

The experience of seeing this lone Palestinian shepherd in the fields of Bethlehem, informed my understanding of today's gospel reading just as much as the theological books I have read! When Jesus says in verse 14 "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me," it makes sense! This sentence evokes a feeling of intimacy, reflecting the image of the shepherd moving with his small flock around the hill.

And this sense of intimacy, love and care also pervades our psalm. The psalm depicts God as provider, protector and healer, a God of hospitality and love, a God who provides both physical and spiritual solace. The psalmist says:

"he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul". and

"Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff comfort me". and

"You spread a table before me" and "you anoint my head with oil".

This image of a shepherd as a leader and protector of the people was well known in scripture. Both Moses and David were shepherds before their journeys to greatness, and the prophetic voices of Ezekiel and Isaiah also proclaimed God as the future shepherd of his people. So, it isn't really a surprise when John uses the "good shepherd" as one of his "I am" metaphors. And certainly, the Pharisees, to whom this passage is addressed, as religious leaders in their day, would have fully understood the loaded significance of this metaphor. And they may also have taken umbrage to his pointed use of the contrasting metaphor of the "hired hand" who runs away because he does not care for his sheep.

Reinforcing the sense of intimacy and love that Jesus builds in describing his relationship with his sheep, is the repeated statement that he will lay down his life for his sheep, in order to take it up again, also foreshadowing his own death and resurrection in the weeks to come. But it is the thread of love, across our readings, that stands out for me today.

It's further developed in our second reading when the writer says:

"We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us".

The writer then exhorts us:

"Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

“And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them.”

Today’s readings are about love. That God loves us, and that we are also to love each other, not just in what we say, but in how we act. And at the deepest level, God’s love for us and our love for each other, makes way for God to abide in us, and we in him - for a profound and personal union between God and ourselves – for a restoration of soul. In a world where chaos, belligerence and self-centeredness seem to dominate, this is particularly good news.

So the teaching today, woven through our Psalm, New Testament and Gospel readings, is about love. We are commanded to love one another, just as Jesus loved us, and in doing so, God will dwell in us and we in him. What a gift! And perhaps these readings will lead us to ponder a couple of questions. How will we show our love for the people in our communities and beyond, and then put this love into action? And, will we be like good shepherds or hired hands?

Let us pray.

Loving God, we give you thanks for your risen son Jesus Christ. We give thanks for life restored and renewed. We ask that we too can be good shepherds and live lives where love for each other leads us to both words and deeds. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.