

John 10:14 “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.’

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Knowing and Being Known.

Easter 4b

1. The Pastoral Image.

Here is an image, far removed from our daily lives, but which is set deeply in our Christian consciousness. “The Lord is my shepherd”, the best known and most loved of the Psalms, fulfilled by Jesus’ words, “I am the Good Shepherd”, in John 10, and also in Luke 15 in the story of the one lost sheep, sought by the shepherd. The Pastoral Image.

Hospitals, schools and workplaces often have chaplains, pastoral care programmes, visitors. Many of these are clergy or lay people of the churches and some are not related to the church at all. Where there is pastoral care at its best there is a kind of ‘knowing’ between people: the pastor/shepherd is known and knows the person and they build up a caring relationship.

That also goes back to the shepherd’s role: the sheep were literally known by name, knew the shepherd’s voice and answered when they were called. They followed where they were lead because they trusted the shepherd. Where there is real Christian caring, all are seen as under-shepherds of the Great Shepherd himself, Jesus Christ our Lord.

For us the ministry of pastoral care begins and ends with Christ, the Good Shepherd. It is from him we receive our calling and it is to him that we are ultimately responsible, though in Christian terms it is always in community, never a strictly private thing. We need the support and encouragement of each other to sustain us all in ministry.

Now that is an image we know and often click in our minds as the true meaning of the Psalm. I would not want to dispute that for there is a kind of knowledge between the flock and the shepherd “sheep-wise” and “people wise”.

“I am the good shepherd I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.” (vss 14,15)

2. Political Image.

There has been another understanding of the word Shepherd which also goes back a long way in the Middle East. Walter Bruggeman has pointed out that kings liked to be known as the shepherds of their people, as truly caring and beneficent rulers, even while they were fleecing and exploiting and oppressing their people. The prophets of Israel made a counter claim when faced with the failure of their rulers, and it emerges in the words of our Psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd”.

This is exactly what Israel was doing when they insisted that the Lord is king and celebrated God as such in their great Psalms. No one else should be accorded the title and authority which belongs to God alone. Just think of the about face at Jesus’ trial when Pilate called Jesus their king, and they are reputed to have said that they have no king but Caesar. Christians came to say that Jesus is Lord, even at the time when Caesar claimed to be Lord of the Roman Empire, and we still make that claim when we are together in Church. Jesus is shepherd and king.

The attack on our saving King is now much more widespread and subtle, not just atheists debating on TV or in other media. Bruce Prewer has a little ditty called ‘Some rhymes about shepherds’ (sort of one-liners)

**False shepherds smile
their way around
wolves in sheep’s clothes
easily found.**

**Political saviours
seek sheep and goats
jumping our fences
buying our votes.**

**Stock exchange gurus
backing the odds
laundering our souls
for many gods.**

**Experts for all things
on TV screen
smoothly dogmatic
proud to be seen.**

**Voices more voices
filling the air
shepherds for hire
deal if you dare.**

**One lonely shepherd
out on a hill
bearing the load
footing the bill.**

There has always been a difference between true shepherds who care for and defend the flock, and false shepherds who literally fleece them. Jesus makes the distinction between a true shepherd and a ‘hireling’ somebody who just works for the pay and will take no risks for the safety of the flock.

William Temple was Archbishop of Canterbury, and wrote in his Readings in St John’s Gospel, (p.160) “Of course a man may be a shepherd at heart, and also a hireling in the sense that he is paid for his work. Many hired shepherds are true shepherds. The test comes when he has to choose between his own interest and that of the flock.”

To the shame of all Christian people some clergy, pastors, shepherds, have betrayed their trust and used members of the flock in wrong and abusive ways. We also know that some have made errors of judgement in dealing with those guilty of such crimes. That is very regrettable, and calls for concern for the victims and the prevention of future abuse. No church, school or youth group can be complacent in protecting its members and staff. For us it is a matter of exercising care and respect towards one another in Christ.

3. THE Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

Isaiah 40:11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Ezekiel 34:16 I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

That may be something for the Royal Commission on Banks?

The way that the promises were fulfilled involved a cost beyond the vision of the prophets, a cost to God, in which the shepherd laid down his life for the sheep.

Leslie Newbigin suggested that we know the kind of leadership which is simply an over-extension of the ego. The ultimate goal is the glory of the leader, not the security of those being lead. By contrast, he said, the mark of the true leader is the cross.

Recall that as Jesus hung on the cross, as Luke tells us (23:35) *The people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him saying, “He saved others, let him save himself, if he is the messiah of God, his chosen one.”*” That is precisely why he did not save himself, for he chose to save the flock: the Good Shepherd laying down his life.

Jesus had seen the wolf coming. It was the wolf in the guise of the legal and religious elite who were under threat by his presence and popularity amongst the people, or on the other hand it may have been the military messiahs who had a quick-fix solution to Israel’s problems. That is why there is constant reference throughout the Gospel stories of Jesus facing up to the eventuality of his death in Jerusalem. It was his decision to go that way. He was the True Shepherd defending his flock.

4. Known and being Known.

I am the Good Shepherd. I known my own and my own know me (vs 14)

This is basically good news to modern people where their identity is constantly under challenge. Sure some people like the anonymity of the huge urban spreads in which most of us live. But the down side is that we are unknown: no one cares if I live, if I suffer, if I die. That is the cause of much insecurity, anxiety and pain.

Here is the staggering claim of the Gospel: We ARE known, not as some vast mob of sheep, but by name. We are cared for, one by one, and not in bulk. And it is not just as our tax file number, but by name. One of the 20th century baptismal hymns says:

*Our names are written in his hand;
He leads us to the promised land.
We rise in wonder from the flood
And love becomes our livelihood. (Frederik Kaan TIS488)*

So I am known, even though I may not know it; I am cared for even though it appears that this is not so; whoever I am, wherever I am, God is with me and God is for me – because that is what the cross and resurrection of Jesus is about. That is an amazing claim, but we have the assurance of the Good Shepherd himself that it is so. Many of us

know that we are sustained and encouraged and provided for by an all-loving Lord Jesus, his Father, and the Spirit who encourages our faith.

Some think that the three-fold questioning of Peter and his discomfort, near the end of John's Gospel, goes back to his denial of Jesus in the garden of the high priest on the night of Jesus' arrest. This is his cleansing and forgiveness.

“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him; “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time he said to him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord you know everything: you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”

Bruce Prewer concludes his sermon for today, this way:

You can stake your life in the faithfulness of this loving shepherd (Jesus). Nothing in the future can outwit his grace: no threat that at first seems overwhelming, no calamity that engulfs us, no grief which in its first dreadful impact makes us wonder if we will ever smile again. Christ's love for each and all is certain.

You can stake your life, and what is even more precious, the lives of those dearest to you, on the goodness of God. As Jesus said, the hireling ..will run away when the wolves attack. The good shepherd stays and will if necessary, give his own life for the sheep. Feed your hope on this incomparable love. Meditate on it. Trust it/ Affirm it. Baptise your mind in it again and again. Celebrate it with your whole being.

Let us pray:

Father we give you thanks for all who have guided our feet into your ways; for all who have nurtured us in faith, hope and love; for all who have brought us close to the great shepherd of the sheep himself, our Lord Jesus. Give us the gift to share such gracious caring with others, in his name. Amen