

The Good Shepherd knows us and loves us

Canon Bill Goodes

Easter 4C – Acts 9:36 – 43, Psalm 23, Rev 7:9 – 17, John 10:22 – 30

“Jesus said, ‘I am the Good Shepherd...My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me’” (John 10:11, 27)

I’m sure you have all seen pictures of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. It is a widely-used image displayed in many churches in windows, on banners, and on prayer cards – the shepherd, crook in hand, is cradling in his arms a loveable lamb. It is a very still, settled image, and one which might have inspired poetry of the romantic age – or even hymns like “loving shepherd of thy sheep”. The famous “shepherd” psalm that we read this morning sets the shepherd and his flock “beside still waters”, “in green pastures” and speaks of “goodness and mercy following all our days”. Even the shepherds who “ran to Bethlehem straightway the Son of God to find” felt secure enough to “leave their flock a-feeding in tempest storm and wind”.

So, it was something of a shock to me when we spent a weekend with our family a couple of weeks ago on a mohair goat farm in Western Victoria. After Church on Sunday morning, our hosts took us into their shearing shed to talk about their journey as shepherds. From the time that they decided to run these special goats, they have faced so many challenges. There must have been constant temptations to give up and do something a bit more predictable! They faced entrenched monopolies, refusal to share blood-stock, droughts that turned the river water they used for their goats into a toxic drink that killed them. The market for their wool has had wild

fluctuations, and some of those who sold it had taken short cuts which gave mohair garments a bad name. They had great trouble finding someone who would deal with the hides of the animals they sold for meat. The goats grow wool which has no lubricant in it, and their wool grows all over the animal, which makes shearing goats a greater challenge than shearing sheep.

At each stage, I was impressed by the way they approached the new situation and were prepared to try new approaches that would enable them to continue their committed love and care for these animals, and to do so in ways that are sustainable, both for the animals and their shepherds!

I was surprised at this tale of adaptability and commitment, but on reflection I realised that even biblical shepherds had their challenges! Remember the lost sheep! That lamb on the shepherd's shoulder in the stained-glass window was one that had been lost, had to be found and pulled out of the brambles with the crook! The passages about the Good Shepherd in the earlier part John 10 spoke of the wolves coming to ravage the flock, and the tendency of the hireling to leave the sheep to their fate when the wolves came. Or remember how Jacob suffered from the machinations of an unscrupulous landlord when Jacob had the responsibility of caring for the landlord's flock (and marrying his daughters!) His inventive ways of managing the breeding programme (of the sheep!) enabled him to thwart the landlord's schemes.

So, a shepherd's lot is "not a happy one" in many respects, and when we speak of Jesus as "the Good Shepherd" we need to take into consideration the negative aspects of the job as well as the "green pastures and still waters" ones.

It seems to me that what our goat-shepherds showed me was first of all a commitment to the animals and the vision of caring for them. But that commitment was not simply a dogged "carrying on in the face of difficulties" – remember Dobbin in

“Animal Farm” : “I will work harder!” No, there had to be a considerable flexibility and a willingness to try new directions to take account of what was happening, events largely outside of their control.

And, you know, that is just what God is like! God’s commitment to his covenant relationship first with the Jewish nation, and then with the Christian community is absolute: his nature as *chesed* – steadfast love expresses that commitment: “God so loved...”

But the way that commitment was expressed varied over time, as God’s people in their various ways frustrated his purposes. God’s commitment to his covenant is absolute and unchanging, but the way it works out seems to be almost infinitely variable! God’s people in slavery in Egypt cry out to God for deliverance, and God hears their voice. The writers of the story make it look as though God knows beforehand all that will take place, and that God “hardened Pharaoh’s heart so that he would not let the people go”, but perhaps there is another way of looking at it: isn’t it just as possible that Pharaoh and his advisers changed their minds, went back on their pre-election promises, and then God’s steadfast love for his people made new provisions which took account of these changes of heart. Then when they were on their journey to the Promised Land, the provision of the bread substitute, meat, potable water, and safe travel were all provided in response to particular situations. Again and again throughout their history the Old Covenant people upset the direction of God’s purposes, and God sent prophets and other agents to work from the new situation that the people had caused, to re-establish the working out of God’s loving purpose.

The Gospel writers normally referred to Judas Iscariot as “Judas who became the traitor”, and so gave the impression that this was always the plan – as though Jesus chose him as a disciple knowing, or even *willing* that he would be the traitor. But of course, these accounts were written well after

the event, and perhaps this description simply expressed the writers' incredulity that anyone could be a close follower of Jesus, and yet betray him.

We also have the capacity to make decisions which are not what God would choose for us, as he wills that we should enjoy fullness of life, and for us to make the best use of our abilities and potential – but we make wrong decisions, and, rather than write us off with a “well if *that's* how you're going to behave” sort of comment and leave us to our fate, the committed loving God is flexible in his dealings with us, and acts to make the best of the situation into which we have dropped ourselves.

So in the picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, we may see ourselves as the lost sheep. From time to time we experience the end of the crook around our necks, trying to drag us, kicking and bleating, out of the delicious-looking thorn-bush into which we have pushed our way! The Good Shepherd knows us, loves us, and puts himself into danger to rescue us. And, once there, no one can snatch us from his hand. Thanks be to God.