

Who is the 'Good Shepherd' ?

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Easter 4A Good Shepherd Sunday – Acts 2 42-47, Ps 23 1, Pt 2 1-10, Jn 10 1-10.

Who is a 'good shepherd' to you? Out in the community, we might think of a Firie or an Ambo. But here in church, probably most of us think first of the divine shepherd of the 23rd Psalm. We often sing it at funerals. We love its assurance that our dear ones will be in good hands from now on: *and in God's house for evermore our dwelling place shall be*. But what about farming shepherds? For Australians, to get what our Jewish-Christian tradition means by a 'good shepherd', we have to put aside our image of someone with a dog on the back of their ute or trail bike and think about the shepherds of Bible times – and as it happens, shepherds in many parts of the world still today.

The shepherd whom the Bible knows stays with the flock day and night. This shepherd's job is to make sure every member of the flock stays healthy and safe; to lead them to places where they'll be well fed and watered. And this traditional shepherd is more than a guide and provider, they're also the midwife when the lambs and kids are born, and the protector from wild animals and any other hazards. None of the flock may be lost. Any stray *must* be found. And any that suffer injury or sickness *must* receive the best possible attention. It's a matter of personal honour for the shepherd that every one is accounted for at the end of each day; all present, fed, watered, well and safe.

To do all this, a good shepherd needs to be vigilant, courageous and dedicated. You have to be able to trust your shepherd to live out their lonely, precarious vocation with all due diligence. A lot depends on this, because the animals

in the flock are the living, breathing, walking bank balance of whoever it is that owns them. A shepherd is ultimately responsible to the owner of the flock. Personally responsible! And in the Middle East of Jesus' time, and today, shepherds are mostly the owners' children; often as young as five or six.

My family's experience of this shepherding culture has been mostly with the Bedouin people of Palestine and the Sinai Desert. They add another dimension to the way we can read today's Gospel; but more about that in a moment.

In this part of John's Gospel, Jesus is speaking to some Pharisees who've just rejected his healing of a man who was blind from birth. They've driven the healed man out of the Synagogue – excommunicated him. Jesus confronts the Pharisees with their blindness to God's grace. Then we come into the story.

Characteristically, coming out of left field, Jesus begins to tell them that *anyone who doesn't enter the sheepfold by the gate, but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit*. What *is* he talking about? He describes how the gatekeeper recognises the true shepherd and opens up the gate; how the sheep know the shepherd's voice and follow trustingly – where they'd run in fear from a stranger's voice. The Pharisees don't get what he's talking about. But if they'd read the old Bible prophecies about good and bad shepherds (eg Ezek 34), they'd know he was saying they were bad shepherds for their ill treatment of the man blind from birth, and for their wilful blindness to God's gift of his healing. They were the bad shepherds, and Jesus the good one. People who hear *his* voice – who trust *him* and follow *him* – will be safe.

Then Jesus develops the image, and gives the first of his great ***I am*** statements in this Shepherd Discourse. *Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.... Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. I*

came that [you] may have life, and have it abundantly.

It's ironic that the Church down the centuries has debated whether this 'gate' is meant to let people in – if it's an opening for entrance and exit ^(BAGD θύρα) – or a barrier to keep them out ^(LSJ cf Roman Circus). ... Let me read those verses again, and you decide which you think Jesus means – opening or barrier.

Vicky and I have encountered Bedouin families who still keep flocks in the traditional, nomadic way. When they're away from their village at night, they gather their flocks into a rough pen of stones topped with thorny branches and, once the flock is inside the pen, the shepherd lies across its entrance and sleeps there. The shepherd's body is quite literally set between the flock and any dangers of the night. It makes us read differently the verse that follows today's reading. Jesus says, *I am the Good Shepherd. The shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.* And he did this literally – as we know.

The image of the 'good shepherd' is a very rich one indeed. We can translate it into the way we must live as Jesus' followers in a non-traditional culture. Our collect prayer today sets it out quite clearly: *Send us as shepherds to rescue the lost, to heal the injured, and to feed one another with understanding.* We are called to be good shepherds now, following Jesus' example. We are his body now; his hands, his feet and his eyes. Anything Jesus would want to see done now must be done by us, selflessly, compassionately, courageously, in love.

We saw the early Church in today's reading from Acts doing just that. People selling their possessions if necessary to provide for others in need were doing what they saw Jesus do for them – he emptied himself for our sake. ^{Phil 2.7-8}

That spirit is alive and well in this parish, and always has been. I can't think of any appeal from a person or group in need that this parish has not responded to. The job, though,

is bigger than just us. Christ's intention is that the world should be saved. In 10¹⁵ ... *I lay down my life for the sheep.* ¹⁶ *I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.*

We are safe; we are well, fed and watered. But there are others who don't know such comfort. Can we please pray again our collect prayer? Amen.

God of all power,
you called from death our Lord Jesus,
the great shepherd of the sheep:
send us as shepherds to rescue the lost,
to heal the injured,
and to feed one another with understanding;
through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**