

## Easter 4

West Hawthorn does not have much to do with sheep. There might be a sheep at the zoo; the Collingwood farm has some. You might see a dead one on a rack in the local butcher – but there are no sheep here. With no sheep, there are probably no shepherds who live here either. Not that in Australia we really go in for shepherds. We sort of assume the sheep can look after themselves, given there are no real natural predators like in first century Palestine. Sheep and shepherds are not part of our daily experience; and yet the image of the good shepherd, for us city slickers, remains still a very powerful image, perhaps *the* image of our faith and within the life of the church. Every church with a stained glass has at least one Jesus as the good shepherd.

From Psalm 23 (perhaps the most famous of all psalms) the shepherd provides, revives the spirit and guides. If there are difficult times this good shepherd protects and comforts, and although the metaphor changes to a meal within the psalm, we can also assume there is blessing, mercy and joy with this good shepherd. There thus is quite a list of things the Good Shepherd does – provides, revives, guides, protects, comforts, blesses and brings mercy and joy. So when Jesus announces, “I am the Good Shepherd,” all these qualities and attributes we apply to Christ. They become part of understanding who God is for us in Jesus.

It is little wonder the image of Jesus being the Good Shepherd is such a powerful and popular image of care and compassion in the Christian faith. And indeed, the church takes the image further. The Good Shepherd becomes the model for all those in leadership within the church, and even for life within the church itself. We have pastors, bishops have shepherd’s crooks, and there is pastoral care to emphasise this connection. In the Uniting Church service of ordination the “pastoral image of the shepherd” features prominently. The candidate is asked: ‘Will you endeavour to be a faithful pastor of God’s people?’ And we used to say in the ordination prayer that Jesus was “the Shepherd of our souls”. Jesus, the Good Shepherd has become the great model for the church and how leadership is to be exercised and applied.

‘End of sermon,’ you might think, ‘Heard that before.’ And it sounds about right. Jesus is our good shepherd – and for those in leadership here is the model of leadership to follow.

While that is all true, is that what our gospel reading is actually saying to us? After all, John records in the verses immediately following our passage that Jesus says he was the Good Shepherd,

Again the Jews were divided because of these words. Many of them were saying, “He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?” Others were saying, “These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?” (vs 19-21)

There was an edge, a poignancy to these words about being a shepherd which provoked profound controversy, division and even hatred. Perhaps we should not be so dewy eyed and readily accepting of this image. Is there something we are missing? Pastoral care, and the role of caring for the flock remain an important and valid image, and role of a minister, of an elder – but is this really what this gospel passage is getting at?

Gail O’Day, a scholar at Emory University in Atlanta, contends that we can gain an image of pastoral ministry within the church from other Bible references, but we need to be careful how we understand this passage. So for example, from last week’s readings when Jesus says to Peter, right at the end of John’s gospel (21:15-19): “Feed my sheep” “tend my sheep”, there is a call to pastoral ministry. Here however, the passage is more about who Jesus is for us and even the very nature of the church itself. O’Day is concerned we may lose insights if we just think of Jesus as being the Good Shepherd, some super hero, and we only apply that model as a guide for a range of people who have certain responsibilities within the church.

The passage has a richer dimension.

So in this passage from John's gospel, Jesus says that he is not only the Good Shepherd, but he is also the gate or door of the sheepfold (1-10). Jesus is more than the one anticipated by the prophet Ezekiel, or the perhaps the psalmist, as the good shepherd; that is a person who provides a new and better kind of leadership. Jesus himself is also the entry point, the way, to life:

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

The point O'Day makes is that this image of being the shepherd, and being the gate or door, are intensely relational – they have no meaning, unless there is for the shepherd the presence of the sheep. In other words, being the Good Shepherd is all about who Jesus is for those who follow him. Jesus here is saying that his own identity, and the identity of the community who follow him, are inextricably linked. The identity of the community is determined by the shepherd's relationship to it, and in turn the community's relationship to the shepherd. This is far more than the good shepherd being a good model for us who is loving caring or compassionate.

There is an image here of communal life; so what is that image?

First of all, everyone gains their identity by their direct relationship to the shepherd. Nowhere in our passage are there pictured among those who follow Jesus other shepherds on the leadership team, or assistant shepherds, or even apprentice shepherds. Rather, all who gather around Jesus receive their identity as members of the flock. There is a direct personal relationship with each person: it does not need to be mediated by someone else. There is equality.

Secondly the community that gathers around Jesus are the ones who share in the mutual knowledge of God and of Jesus, and whose relationship to Jesus is modelled on Jesus' relationship to God. So Jesus says:

"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."

Mutuality. We learn from Jesus; God learns from us. As you can see it is becoming an interesting flock. The words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's comes to mind (240): all go to God when they are sorely placed. Perhaps the standard image of the good shepherd. He then says

We go to God when he is sorely placed,  
find him poor, scorned, unsheltered, without bread,  
whelmed under weight of evil, weak or dead.  
We stand by God then, in God's hour of grief.

And then thirdly, by listening to Jesus' voice, this is the source of the community's unity. The flock holds together, indeed is a flock, because they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. There is a unity. And we might ask - why would they want to just listen to this one voice? This goes back to the image of Jesus being the door and gate. Jesus is the access point to life. Yes, he can stop thieves and bandits getting in (who are really the false teachers, charlatans and fraudsters). He stops these; there is only his voice, but provides the door, the access, *the access* to life.

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (10:10)

He is life-giving.

And this then comes the significant point of this whole image of the flock and shepherd being inextricably bound up together. How does the good shepherd give life? The community gains its identity through Jesus' preparedness to give his own life for them. That is, *to be a member of Jesus' flock, this little group of people here, is to know oneself as being among those for whom Jesus is willing to die.* In Jesus' freely chosen death, Jesus shows the way to life, and offers abundant life by the example of his love. He is the good shepherd . . . and not a hireling; an employee, some 'sheep are us' sub-contractor.

Indeed, it makes sense of why we have this reading each year in the middle of the Easter season. It reinforces to us Jesus' willingness to die for the community and offer new life. However, his offer of life is not just for *his* sheep, *his own* flock, the in-crowd – it is for all, it is for *the* sheep. After all, he says he has other sheep that do not belong to this fold.

“I must bring them also.”

Throughout John's gospel the love of Jesus is for the world, the whole world – it is inclusive and not exclusive. In chapter 6 of John he speaks of being the bread of life and giving his life for “the life of the world”. And, of course we know from chapter 3, God so loved *the world* he sent his only Son.

Jesus makes the love of God fully available by expressing that love in his death. His love is for all – but it is his flock who hear his voice –and thus have a particular responsibility to show that love they have received. . . however, that might be expressed.

The Good Shepherd is a powerful and comforting image for us personally; it is great having someone caring, guiding and helping us.

The Good Shepherd is an important image for the church as a model for ministry and leadership. And in recent time we have not had good shepherds, but many hirelings just concerned for themselves and their needs.

However, John 10 is really about the church and the community who follow Christ.

1. All are accepted as equals. We all have that direct relationship with the shepherd. That is how this flock works.
2. There is a mutuality of love between us and the shepherd. We respect the shepherd and vice versa.
3. There is unity within the flock. There is after all just the one voice; the one shepherd – and not a lot of thieves and robbers.
4. And within the community, within the flock there is life – a gift freely offered to all through his death on the cross . . . a gift even for other flocks; but especially to this flock that hears his voice.