

Sermon – 21 Apr. 24 Jn 10.11-18; Ps 23; 1 Jn 3.16-24

Good Shepherding

Who are the most vulnerable people in our society? ...

Now, think about how the vulnerable are cared for. Who cares and provides for them? How often do we hear about these vulnerable peoples?

Think of your answers to this as you watch Mr Indifferent:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLGNj-xrgvY&t=2s>

This morning, I want to focus on three of our passages and how they help us to navigate our response to God's calling for us to model Jesus Christ's example of being a *Good Shepherd*.

I've come across two understandings from the ancient world, or schools of thought, about the concept of shepherding in relation to its use in Psalm 23 and in our Gospel passage.

Firstly, in the time of David, a king would be understood to be a shepherd of their people. It was the responsibility of kings to provide and protect the people within their kingdom, but of course, power and greed, their own sense of importance, all the human traits that cause leaders to fail were ever so present. But where earthly kings fail, God does what a shepherd is supposed to do. So, in v.1 of Psalm 23 the writer announcing, *the Lord is my shepherd* is pledging their allegiance, their loyalty to God with the intention to live under God's reign.

Secondly, the ancient world knew and understood that sheep were the most vulnerable of animals. Obviously, the very reason that the shepherding profession existed in the first place. So, the metaphor for

sheep and shepherding could be easily understood by the people living in the subsistence culture of the time. Sheep needed a leader to follow to the green pastures and the still waters. Sheep needed a leader to protect them from predators, both animal and human, so a lost sheep equates with a sitting duck. (maybe there is the makings of a joke here: what do you get if you cross a lost sheep with a sitting duck?)

Both the writer of this Psalm and Jesus uses the metaphor of a shepherd to highlight how God is the leader of the vulnerable. In Psalm 23, the writer looks for the reassurance of God's provision as they themselves are vulnerable. God as the shepherd will provide. The shepherd leads the sheep to green pastures for food, the still waters for drink and along the right paths to avoid danger and find proper shelter. God's leading in the right paths in v.3 anticipates part of God's character mentioned in v.6, that those loyal to God will experience God's *goodness and mercy*.

The writer of Psalm 23 reminds us that we can be vulnerable. It reminds us that we need reassurance, despite living in a comfortable and safe place like Australia. If you look at the rising cost of living, the greater prevalence of disease since Covid 19, and even some of the unlikely and devastating events in Sydney over the past week, as unlikely as it is, it is possible that we can be made vulnerable at any time. God helps us overcome our vulnerabilities by providing the basic necessities in order to live. God helps us when we give our loyalty and allegiance to God who guides us, gives us peace, and inspires calm. Even when our troubles feel insurmountable, God's presence alleviates our fears, and we can trust in God delivering us, helping us through the hardships we face.

If Psalm 23 provides us with reassurance of the shepherd's goodness and mercy in our lives, Jesus provides us with insight into the shepherd's attitude towards being a leader.

Jesus refers to himself as the good shepherd, saying *I am the good shepherd*. This is the only time he refers directly to himself. Going on to explain what it means to be the good shepherd; Jesus uses OT images of being a shepherd. The word, *good* in Greek also has the meaning of model or true, so we could consider this shepherd is the model for God's image of a good shepherd. In Ezekiel 34.11-16, God the good shepherd cares for the sheep, rescuing them from the places where the flock scattered to, feeding them and tending to the weak, the hurt and the lost. So, here we see Jesus identifying himself as the good shepherd modelled in Ezekiel 34, and so fulfilling God's promises of doing God's work.

Of course, in v.11 we now acknowledge Jesus saying the good shepherd is one who lays down their life for the sheep as pointing to his own death. Some of the Pharisees and others who were listening to Jesus would have been rather more dismissive of this. It's possible Jesus points to the prophecy of the Messiah in Zechariah 13, where the death of the shepherd is required so that the flock can be purified. This is one of those points that divided the listeners. There are those that would claim that Jesus has a demon and is out of his mind in v.19 and therefore, rejected Jesus as the Messiah.

In v.12, Jesus describes the failure of the hired hand to provide for and protect the sheep. This reiterates what I mentioned earlier that earthly kings fail to provide and protect. It also echoes the bad shepherd image

in OT literature, painting the picture of the hired hand being only concerned for their own well-being and ignoring, forgetting, leaving, overlooking, and being indifferent to well-being of the sheep. It's fair to say many of the dismissive Pharisees are like the hired hand

The imagery of Jesus as the good shepherd is an image that we have all come across and resonates with us. Early in Chapter 10, Jesus promotes the image of him being the gate through which we enter God's kingdom and now as the shepherd, lead us to God's kingdom. The *I am* statements in chapter 10 do more than reveal who Jesus is to us. It reveals Jesus is in a relationship with those who follow him. Just like Psalm 23, this is very reassuring for us. The identities of Jesus and his community of followers are intimately and inextricably linked; just as the image of Jesus as the good shepherd and the Ezekiel image of God as the good shepherd are.

As members of the community of followers, we who follow identify as members of the flock. In a way, we are gifted our identity through Jesus' sacrificing his life so we can be saved. The metaphor of Jesus being the gate through which to enter, gives us life; and the good shepherd, which we follow, is an example of divine love and sacrifice. In his ultimate act of self-sacrifice, dying for us, Jesus shows the way to life through the gate, and offers an abundant life by the example of his love as the shepherd.

Now, I've seen many who, in a sense, sit back and consider that there is nothing more that they need to do to gain eternal life. However, this is not the response I believe is the one that Jesus gave his life for. The reading of 1 John 3 provides us with the insight of how we need to respond as God intends us to – sharing the love Jesus gifted us.

In the verses preceding v.16 of 1 John, we are shown what love does not look like. There is a warning about what our deeds and actions should look like – definitely not like those of the murderous Cain. In v.14, we are told that *whoever does not love abides in death* and that those who hate will not receive eternal life.

So, clearly, as a follower of Jesus Christ then it's very clear that we need to love. The required response to Jesus loving us is to love in return. It requires loving through action, just as Jesus acted in his love for us. Words can be powerful and inspiring, but in 1 John we learn that words alone are an inadequate expression of love. God's love for us is what is known in Greek as agape love. The self-sacrificial unconditional love that asks for nothing in return. Perhaps unsurprisingly, vv.23-24 invokes Matthew 22 and the greatest commandment – to love God and to love others.

If we are to look to Jesus as our role model for being the good shepherd, then we need to carefully consider what 'laying down one's life' looks like in our context. In the very early church, being martyred was considered an act of faith and the mark of a true believer. However, 1 John 16 provides us with a more realistic understanding. Laying down our life in death is not to be taken literally as some might consider John 10 suggests. Rather, in light of the emphasis on action and truthful expressions of communal love in 1 John, laying down our lives is better understood in the words of Paul in Philippians (2.4), *Look to the interests of others*.

The writer of 1 John anticipates there are people who are ignorant, self-serving, apathetic, and indifferent to the needs of others. So now we

have the contrast between those who act in love and those who follow another path. In the first section of the video we saw what it is like to live in ignorance, apathy, and self-centredness. You could ask how can the love of God reside in such a person? The main character looks uninterested, lost, and lonely. The second half of the video shows us someone living out love – acts of agape love. Someone who sees a need and acts. There is no apparent reward, but there is energy and joy as he walks along the street. He now has a greater sense of belonging and this in turn shows those he helps that they belong too.

1 John sums up for us how we can be good shepherds to those around us. There is no talking about what should be done, where you might say “I’m thinking of you” and gesture platitudes that are supposed to lift the spirits of someone in need. Rather, it is a clear directive; *let’s not talk about love; let’s practice real love*. Real love is grounded in action and truth. The action of love is borne out of Christ’s love for us, and shows those being helped to know they belong and are part of God’s people, just as we know, through Christ’s good shepherding of us, that we belong to God.

Loving Jesus,

We are so blessed to have you lead us as our good shepherd. Through your example, provide us with ability to continue to let our love act in serving and helping those in need. Amen.