

Sermon Easter 4 Year C 2022

In the warm afterglow of Easter, in the continued light of the burning Easter Candle, this Sunday is traditionally given over to reflection on Christ the Good Shepherd. Each year in the three-year cycle of readings a different aspect of this image is presented to us; each year highlighting different aspects of the rich and nuanced imagery associated with Christ the Good Shepherd. In the warm afterglow of Easter, this is appropriate because it is one of the key images that emerges from the gospel record to comfort us, to encourage us, indeed, to inspire us to live better Easter life, to live more fully Easter faith. Christ calls us, leads us, protects us, comforts us, so for us to stay in the flock of the one true faith of the one true shepherd.

The image of the Good Shepherd is, of course, one of the most enduring and endearing images of Jesus in the whole of the Christian spiritual tradition: the shepherd who protects and gathers, and who lays down his life for his sheep. Visit any number of country churches up and down this wide land will attest to this affection. There is no shortage of depictions - in stained glass in particular - of Jesus the Good Shepherd. Curiously, no such depiction in this church.

In Anglican and some other protestant churches, this depiction of Jesus is the most common. I have a theory that when a little country church had raised enough money, perhaps in memory of a founder, or a generous benefactor, or a well-loved local personality, a depiction of the Good Shepherd would be among the first recommendations to the church leadership as a suitable memorial. Oftentimes in a church, it will be *the only* coloured glass window in a church. All this to say, there is a tremendous fondness for this depiction of our Lord. It speaks to us in a way few other images of Christ do, at least in the Anglican tradition.

Now, lest we read something into a biblical text that simply isn't there, we should note that in the text placed before us today there is no reference to 'the good shepherd', so to speak. In fact, in the reading today there are but two references to 'sheep' and that is it! 'Good *sheep* Sunday' doesn't have the same ring to it as 'Good Shepherd Sunday'... But what is placed before us today, in all its brevity and economy of words, is part of that important chapter of John 10 where Jesus *does* declare himself as the Good Shepherd. And it certainly does add to that rich catalogue of ideas and images that come through to us in the gospels - and elsewhere in the scriptures - of sheep and shepherds and of shepherding.

The enduring popularity of the image of Christ the Good Shepherd, however, should not be robbed of its power by mere sentimentalism. The gospel portion placed before us today certainly won't permit a sentimental, sappy, or maudlin reading. There are some important ideas here - critical ideas at play here - about obedience, about the co-eternal dignity of the Son with the Father, about Jesus' gift of eternal life to those who follow him. And some tricky ideas are flagged here as well: of those who might seek to 'steal' from the Lord Christ. Malicious intent, in other words, will be directed against those who follow Christ, who listen to him, who heed his voice.

This idea of malicious intent against both the sheep - and by extension the shepherd - is confirmed in the verse immediately following what we hear today, *The Jews took up stones again to stone him*. This verse was included in all the ancient and medieval lectionaries of this reading. It would seem their psyches and sensibilities were less fragile than ours. But again, it reminds us we cannot get carried away with sentimental notions here. We have to look past, indeed shatter, some of the stained-glass images.

But we do not need to go to that extreme to recover a more authentic sense of Christ the Good Shepherd. Jesus our Good Shepherd isn't our shepherd simply so we'll feel comforted or safe in his arms, but, more essentially *to rescue us*, to save us. It is *that* simple idea that is at the heart of this imagery; this simple idea which might recover the power that lay behind the sentimentalism. Now, most of us, I'm afraid to say, *are not* little lambs frolicking innocently in the countryside¹ Mostly, we are his bleating, recalcitrant, wandering sheep! Hence the shepherd's crook! This isn't a mere aesthetic ornament. In our Lord's day, shepherd's crooks were oak, heavy and hard. One end was curved, to hook wayward sheep by the neck or leg, the other end was often sharpened to a point. When our Lord referred to us as His sheep, it wasn't a compliment on how cute and lovable we are, but an acknowledgment of our ignorance and stubbornness. Humble obedience - listening - the only way to stay close.

The Good Shepherd, we are told earlier in this chapter, "*gives His life for the sheep.*" If the profusion of stained-glass windows in Australian country churches are somewhat overly sentimental, not every depiction of the Good Shepherd is misleading. The oldest surviving Christian statue in the world, dating from about AD 260, is in the Vatican's Pio Cristiano Museum. You may have seen images of it. I've had the privilege to see it in person on a number of occasions. It is of the Good Shepherd.

It may be a reimagining of the classical depictions of Apollo. But at the dawn of the Christian era, this statue depicts Christ as a young David, a beardless youth, with both hands firmly clutching a sheep, slung over His shoulders. He carries the sheep that way not because it's easy but because the sheep is wounded: it's bleating in pain. The Good Shepherd is taking the wounded, crying sheep back to the flock. The image is perhaps even more poignant when we realise that it was originally – before an 18th-century 'restoration' - part of the ornamentation of a sarcophagus. As such, it gave perfect expression to Christian hope. *Christ literally carries us out of the pit of death.* He rescues us! He saves us. He goes down to the very depths to redeem us. He gives his life for the sheep, precisely to carry us to life.

When the angry Jews went looking for rocks to throw at Jesus it wasn't because He compared Himself to a shepherd. They were stirred to anger and resentment because they knew their Bible. The background for this chapter in John's gospel isn't so much psalm 23, or of David the shepherd-King of Israel, much less the general experience of agrarian life in the first century. No. Rather it is Ezekiel who had a lot to say not about good shepherds, but bad. He writes against the failed leaders who were speaking false words of comfort, who were leading the people of Israel down dangerous paths. They were entrusted with the care of God's people but looked after themselves instead. But Ezekiel had promised that a Good Shepherd was coming, and, that He would be God Himself: *"...thus saith the Lord God: Behold, I, even I, will seek out My sheep, and deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered; I will gather them from the countries, and bring them to their own land, and feed them upon the mountains of Israel. I will feed My flock, and I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord God."*

The Good Shepherd comes to redeem and save the sheep, at whatever cost to Himself. Our Lord in the gospel portion today says so simply: *I give them eternal life.* He gives the sheep of his flock eternal life. He gives *us* eternal life. The cost was his own life. He goes down to the very depths of human experience, the very depths of human misery and suffering precisely to carry us out. Easter is the promise that this is trustworthy and true. We can follow him and entrust ourselves to the Good Shepherd, because he went to the pit of death and came out again. And not for himself, but for the flock. Now that, *that*, truly is worthy of our devotion and of our heartfelt affection. Amen.