

## Sermon 30 April 2023 The Good Shepherd

### 1 Peter 2:19-25 John 10:1-10

The image of Jesus as a shepherd is one which the people of his day would have related to. It was very much a rural society. The main part of Judaea was a central plateau, stretching from Bethel to Hebron for a distance of about 55 kilometres and varying from 22 to 27 kilometres across. The ground was, for the most part, rough and stony. Judaea was much more a pastoral than an agricultural country, and it was therefore inevitable that the most familiar figure of the Judaeian uplands was the shepherd.

The shepherd's life was very hard. There being little grass, the sheep were bound to wander and so they had to be constantly watched. There was no such thing as fences in those days. And there was the danger from wild animals and thieves. So constant vigilance, fearless courage, patient love for his flock were the necessary characteristics of the shepherd.

The other very important characteristic was sacrifice. With danger of wild animals and unscrupulous thieves, the shepherd had to be prepared to put his life on the line. Both Peter in our first reading and Jesus himself in the gospel reading allude to this willingness in his role as a shepherd to his flock, to lay down his life for those he cares for.

In terms of the message for us, hopefully we will not be called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice for others. Last week, in celebrating Anzac Day, we broached this. However, again as I mentioned last Sunday, we are expected to make some sort of sacrifice in order to improve the lot of those who are in need of some help.

And we are certainly called upon to take up Jesus' challenge to be caring shepherds of his flock, his flock being God's people. This analogy has its origins in the Old Testament. Psalm 79 – *'We are your people, the sheep of your pasture.'* Psalm 95 – *'We are the people he watches over, the sheep under his care.'* Ezekiel 33:12 – *'I will be like a shepherd looking for his scattered flock. I will find my sheep and rescue them from all the places to which they are scattered.'* And then the words from Psalm 23, which we will be singing soon, *'The Lord's my shepherd I'll not want.'*

So Jesus picks up this image from his Jewish scriptures, our Old Testament, and applies it to the people of his day, which in turn applies to us today. The challenge he lays at our feet is to go out of our way in order to care for others, to be prepared to make sacrifices for the benefit of others, echoing the spirit of the shepherds of his time.

This applies to the disenfranchised, the poor, the sick, those who have lost their way, as represented in the story of the lost sheep that he tells in Matthew 18, as he continues this analogy of a shepherd caring for his sheep. *'If a shepherd has one hundred sheep, and one wanders away and is lost, what will he do? Won't he leave the ninety-nine others and go out into the hills to search for the lost one? And if he finds it, he will surely rejoice over it more than over the ninety-nine that didn't wander away. In the same way, it is not my heavenly Father's will that even one of these little ones should perish.'* That one sheep represents anyone who is less fortunate than ourselves. They are as special as anyone and it is our task to seek them out and offer them support.

There is a true story of a ship that was steaming at full speed in the Gulf Stream off the coast of Florida under the command of Captain George Grant. The youngest member of the crew, a seventeen-year-old lad,

had been sent by the chief mate to clear out the scuppers. He slipped and fell overboard, and no-one saw the incident.

An hour later, when the crew sat down to breakfast, they noticed the boy was not present. An immediate search was organised. Every inch of the ship was searched, but in vain. The captain was informed. He summoned the chief mate on to the bridge and asked him when it was that he had last seen the boy. The chief replied that he had sent the boy to clear the starboard scupper at about 7.10am.

Looking at his watch, the captain noted that it was 8.21am. An hour and eleven minutes had passed. In other words, the boy would be eighteen miles astern. The captain without hesitation ordered fuel to be pumped into the sea and kept the vessel on course for a few more minutes, until the oil had laid a path behind her. When the direction was well-defined, the oil was shut off, the ship turned around and steamed back along the path exactly the way she had come.

‘We have to go back 20 miles from here,’ declared the captain, ‘One hour and twenty minutes. Watch the time.’

The captain did not expect to find the boy. Cross winds and current drift and a head is such a small object to spot in a vast area of rough seas. He glances at his watch. Only a few minutes to go.

‘Reduce speed,’ he ordered. His eyes kept sweeping to and fro. Suddenly he gave the command, ‘Stop the engines! Stand by to lower the boat.’

Incredibly his uncanny knack of reading the sea had enabled him to spot the boy’s head bobbing up and down less than a hundred metres away. A rare feat of navigation coupled with years of experience had achieved the near impossible.

Later, when the boy had recovered from his ordeal, the captain went down to see him. He asked him, ‘You were in the water for over 2 hours. Did you ever lose hope?’ The boy replied, ‘No, sir. I knew you would come back for me.’ ‘How could you be so sure that I would?’ replied the captain. The boy looked up at him and said quietly, ‘ Because you are like that, sir.’

Could we say the same thing about ourselves? Are we the sort of people who are prepared to go out on a limb in order to reach out those in need, to do our best to alleviate the suffering of someone who is being battered by the storms of life? How do we measure up as shepherds of God’s flock?