

Sermon 21 April 2024 The Good Shepherd

1 John 3:16-24 John 10:11-18

Jesus said, *'I am the Good Shepherd.'* It is a wonderful image. He was quoting from the well-known 23rd Psalm, *'The Lord is my shepherd,'* which we will be singing shortly, and from the prophet Ezekiel where God says, *'I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down.'* Ezekiel 34:15.

So here Jesus was identifying himself with God his Father, and saying that together they care for each one of us, just as a good shepherd cares for every single one of his sheep.

In Palestine the grazing of sheep takes place, not on lush pasture but invariably high up ridges where grass is scarce. So, the shepherd led the sheep from one place to another in search of pasture. No fences meant no protection. Wild animals, not to mention thieves, were a constant threat. The safety of the sheep was the concern of the shepherd. He lived with them, spent his days and nights with them, fought off wild animals with either a sling shot, his staff, or even his bare hands. In other words, the shepherd was prepared to put his life on the line for his sheep. I am sure you can see why Jesus referred to himself as the Good Shepherd. It was his willingness to put his life on the line for us that makes this analogy so relevant.

As we know, the issue of sacrifice lies at the heart of the Easter story. That is the ultimate sacrifice. Not many of us are called upon to make a sacrifice of that nature, but down through the ages there are those who have done just that.

Some of you might remember the story of the Air Florida flight that crashed into the icy waters of the Potomac River just after taking off from Washington airport in 1982. There were only six survivors, all in the water clinging to a fragment of the plane's tail section. Only minutes were available for a rescue before the survivors would freeze to death in the water, so there was no time to send a boat. There was only one small helicopter, which could handle just one person at a time, hovering over the survivors, lowering a lifeline and flotation ring, waiting till the person was holding tight, and then dashing to the shore for safety.

Each time the helicopter returned and lowered its line, one of the survivors, a middle-aged, balding man with a great moustache, would grab hold of the flotation ring and pass it to one of the others with him in the water. When at last the five had been rescued and the helicopter returned for him, the man was gone. Overcome by the cold, he had slipped quietly to his death in the dark freezing waters.

We ask ourselves what could possibly prepare a person to respond so instinctively with such greatness of heart? How to live the resurrection is an ongoing challenge for us all. It doesn't mean we have to literally give our lives for others, but it does mean figuratively we should do so. What does that mean? We have talked about this on more than one occasion recently. I think simply to be prepared to make sacrifices for benefit of others, to live our lives in such a way that we bring blessings to others. For me, that about sums it up. If we can do that, then I believe we do justice to Christ's resurrection and to the intent of the Christian gospel.

American philosopher and theologian, Michael Novak, wrote, *'Love is not a feeling of happiness. Love is a willingness to sacrifice.'* Last week I made the point that if there isn't a willingness to make some sort of sacrifice in a loving relationship, then that relationship is unlikely to be sustained. Love comes in a variety of forms. In the Christian context, the Greek word *agape* is used to convey the meaning, the intent of love as commanded to us by Christ. If we were to use one word to translate *agape*, we could use the word *'charity,'* but it would embrace kindness, care, consideration etc.

The point is this, we should be in a loving relationship with those around us, whoever they might be. That's the Christian ethic; that's the Christian directive. So, if we refer back to the words of Michael Novak, this love, this charity, if you like, should involve a willingness to make some sort of sacrifice. It means we are encouraged to approach love with selflessness and a willingness to prioritise the needs, well-being and happiness of others.

Paul puts it so very well in his letter to the Colossians, *'And the most important piece of clothing you must wear is love. Love is what binds us all together in harmony.'* Colossians 3:14. Each one of us has the tool to help create an harmonious community – it is called 'charity,' or more commonly referred to as 'love.' Think of our community as a flock, and we are the shepherds.

And let's not forget that the more we give, the more we receive, and this certainly applies to love and service. American motivational speaker, Jim Rohn, said, *'Whoever renders service to many puts himself or herself in line for greatness – great satisfaction, great reputation, and great joy.'* I am not so sure that we should be doing it in order to enhance our reputation, but you get the point! We are encouraged to embrace opportunities for service and to prioritise making a positive impact on the lives of others. Through acts of service and selflessness, we can experience personal growth, fulfilment and a sense of purpose.

I want to finish by referring to our first reading, and in particular verse 18, which reads, *'Dear friends, let us stop just saying we love each other; let us really show it by our actions.'* Without a doubt, one of my favourite verses in the Bible. What I like about this verse, apart from the obvious message of the need to spread around a little love, is the urgent and definitive nature John brings to his message. He is saying we shouldn't go about this spreading of love in a half-hearted manner, but rather with as much purpose as we possibly can.

There is the story of a school chaplain (it wasn't me!), who had a father bring his son to see him. The father told the chaplain that he was not happy with the way his son had turned out. He said, 'I sent him to college to get a good education, to make something of himself, and people like you have got his head turned around. Look at him now. He's doing mission work. He is out on the streets trying to help the down-and-outs. He's given his money away to poor old ladies. All he cares about is reaching out to the losers of the world.' Then the father said, 'Don't get me wrong, Chaplain, I don't mind being Christian, but only up to a point!'

We come back to that word 'sacrifice.' You simply cannot make a sacrifice only up to a point. We are either in or we are out. John is telling us that we cannot be a Christian up to a point. Christ does not want us to half-hearted Christians. The analogy of the Good Shepherd certainly does not convey a message, an understanding of half-heartedness. It is a message of selfless commitment.