

Easter 4: **Shepherd Image of Intimacy with God**

22 April, 2018

Reading: John 10;11-18, Psalm 23

Open the meaning of the Bible to us in a fresh and exciting way.
In Jesus name. Amen.

He was old, really old. The family asked me to go and visit him so that when I took the funeral I might know something about him. He was, it turned out, a veteran of the first world war. Well into his 90's, he told me a little of what it was like in the trenches. I could only guess at the horrors. "I've never learned to read and write," he said "but in the trenches I learned the 23rd Psalm off by heart. I said it over and over to myself as the shells burst around me and my friends were dying. It was that line especially, *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for you are with me*, that helped me."

Today we hear again both Psalm 23 and Jesus image of himself as the Good Shepherd. To be sure this is one of the most favourite images of all time. It is an image that people have turned to over and over again to sustain them.

When Queen Victoria's beloved husband Prince Albert died, she choose to have the 23rd Psalm set to the tune Crimond at the funeral, and we have been singing it ever since.

When the Cave Creek platform collapsed, it was the words of Psalm 23 which were read to bring comfort at the memorial service . Immediately after the deadly earthquakes in Christchurch, it was Psalm 23 that Bishop Victoria read at the first memorial service to bring comfort. The most visited church in New Zealand is dedicated to the Good Shepherd: the Church of the Good Shepherd in Tekapo.

But why is this image so powerful for us? This image of Jesus caring for the sheep, of his voice calling us, of him tending our wounds and driving away wolves.

One word helps explain it. Intimacy. The image of the Good Shepherd is one of intimacy, of caring and closeness. Even though the number of sheep in New Zealand is not what it was, this image still attracts us.

In a couple of weeks Sue Robb and Pamela Galbraith, members of our congregation head off for a pilgrimage around the Holy Land. A recent visitor to the Holy Land recorded this sight:

Early one morning I saw an extraordinary sight not far from Bethlehem. Two shepherds had spent the night with their flocks. The sheep were all mixed together and the time had come for the shepherds to go in different directions. One shepherd stood some distance from the sheep and began to call first one then another then four then five animals. They ran to him. He did this until he had called out his entire flock. The shepherd had nicknames for all the sheep. One was Long Ears the other Fluffy Bum and so the flock gathered.

This is just the sort of pastoral scene that Jesus had in mind when he said I am the Good Shepherd. This sort of intimacy.

Of course sheep farming in New Zealand is a little different. When my brother-in-law moves his sheep he has no more idea of the names of the sheep than they do his. And rather than calling them from the front he drives them along behind with dog and truck.

The Christian life is one of growing intimacy with Jesus. We might start with the idea that God is far off but in order to progress we need to grow a sense of friendship with Jesus.

Last month I was lucky enough to go to the Association of Anglican Women, or AAW. They had as their speaker Dr Sue Bagshaw. Dr Sue is a very impressive person. Not only is she warm and personable but she has a passionate concern for the well being of young people. Over the years she has been involved in many centres and projects to help the mental and physical health of young people in our community. You have probably seen her on TV. Her husband has been instrumental in starting the Charity Hospital here in Christchurch. Recently with the help of Anglican Care she and the Bishop opened a Youth Hub. It is designed to be a one stop shop for young people to help them get the support many youth in our community need and can't access elsewhere because of cost or embarrassment or location or awareness. Impressive as all her programmes and caring are, what interested me most was her motivation. She said, "I see Jesus as my friend, my constant companion. It is all about relationship. I have a relationship with Jesus." Sue is an Anglican a parishioner at St Paul's, Papanui.

I've taken too many rest home services so this tune drives me crazy but the words are still good:

*What a friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer!
Oh what peace we often forfeit,
Oh what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer.*

A simple question - do you have a close intimate relationship with Jesus? Do you see him as a friend, a shepherd, a brother? Do you talk with him in prayer?

It's really that simple.

Father Pedro Arrupe, a head of the Jesuit order, spoke of intimacy with God like this: *Nothing is more practical than finding God: that is, than falling in love in a quite absolute way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you do with your evenings, how you spend your weekend, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.*

I love the prayer of St Richard of Chichester which puts this intimate relationship and our task of maturing in a nutshell:
*O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know thee more clearly,
love thee more dearly,
and follow thee more nearly, day by day.
Amen.*