

The Power of Pastoral Care Done Together

Easter 3

1 May 2022

Reading: John 21:1-19

Never underestimate the power of a caring community.

This last week I received a lovely email from Bill Germin. Bill and his wife Jane spent just 6 months with us before they moved to Central Otago. Bill writes *Thank you for your kind words on Palm Sunday upon our departure from the Parish. We were enjoying the services and the fellowship very much at St Peters. It feels like a vibrant community of lovely faithful people who know what faith and worship are all about.*

A caring community can do so much more than just one person on their own. One day described rugby as 30 people desperately in need of a rest watched on by 10,000 people desperately in need of some exercise. Some parishes feel like that too, but not so this parish. As I review the many reports for the AGM, I'm very conscious of how much people do, not just in the parish, but also in the community. In my report I start on that difficult slippery slope of naming a few when so many could be named.

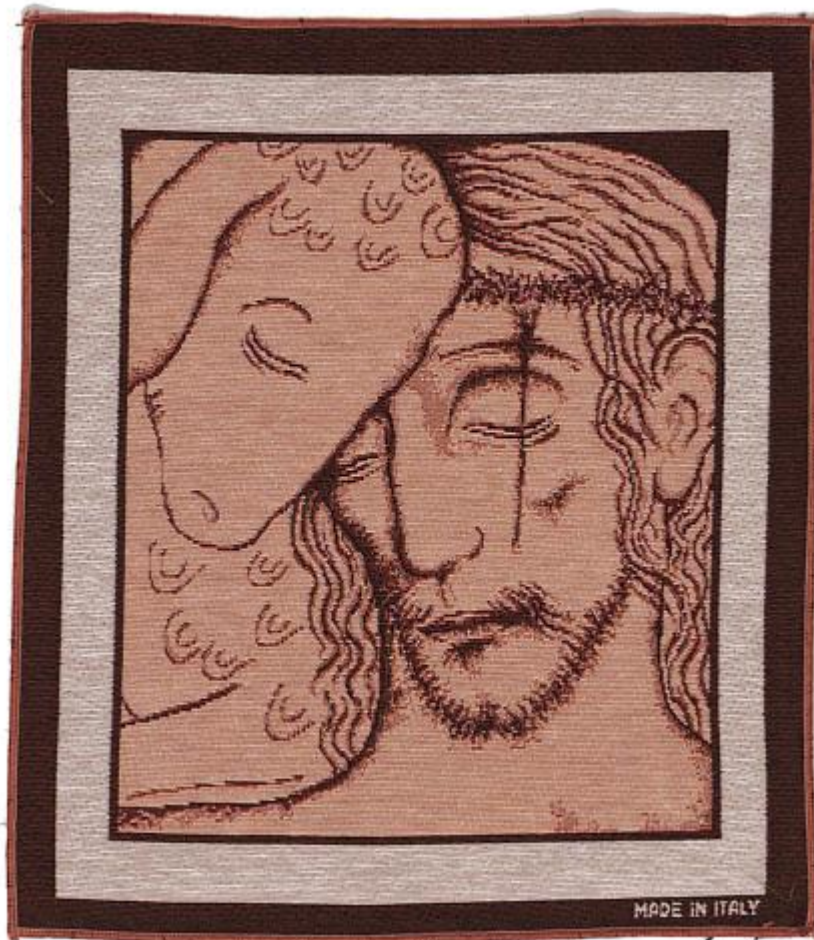
But why do we bother caring? After all, wouldn't it just be easier to do our own thing. To ignore others and just focus on ourselves.

Three words make all the difference in the Gospel today. Jesus is going for a walk with Peter after serving the disciples' breakfast. Jesus asks Peter not once, not twice, but three times, "Do you love me?" It's a very beautiful moment because Jesus is risen from the dead and he is allowing Peter to undo his three-fold denial of Him. Remember the rooster. We have a rooster at the back of the church which is designed to go on the top of the tower. Because Peter is our patron saint, we have the symbol of the rooster. But it's a painful symbol because it reminds us of how Jesus couldn't rely on Peter in his darkest hour. A lesser man would be seeking revenge, "You let me down big time Peter," he might say. But not Jesus. There is something subtle going on in the Greek. Jesus says to Peter "Do you love me?" but the word he uses is *agape*. Do you love me unconditionally? Peter answers "You know that I love you," but the word he uses is *Philo*, which means family love. I love you like a brother he is saying. In the end Jesus changes the word for love to accept Peter's limited form of love, but tells him there will come a time when you will love me unconditionally. We know that's true because Peter goes on to a cross of his own. Jesus today accepts the limited forms of love we can offer too.

Then come the words which change everything. "Tend my lambs." This is the beginning of pastoral caring. Even people that have nothing to do with the church or no knowledge of Jesus know about pastoral care. But all the pastoral care in all the world begins with these three simple words, "Tend my lambs."

For us to have the energy and the motivation to care for others we need to first know that we are loved and cared for by Jesus.

For some reason which escapes me, an Italian icon company sends me weekly emails. One such icon really moved me. It shows the crucified Jesus being embraced by a lamb. I like it a lot because most of the images of Jesus the Good Shepherd have a strong vibrant Jesus, with a limp lamb over his shoulders. Whereas this one has the lamb the same size as Jesus, on an equal footing, embracing the crucified Christ.



Many of us in the caring professions can find ourselves in this Covid season suffering not from burn out so much as from brown out. The way forward for us lies in this image. We are the lamb that Jesus embraces. The more we know his care and intimacy the better we are able to care for others.

It's counterintuitive. Martin Luther the great reformer is quoted as saying, "I have so much to do today, I need to spend three hours in prayer this morning." We think the more we have to do the less time we have to pray. But the closer we lean into Jesus the more we have to offer others.

So, what so special about Christian community? Well, we are more together than we are on our own. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Kathryn Butler was a trauma and critical care surgeon who left work to homeschool her children.

Of all people, she knew what she was going through. It was called depression.

She writes about how she found peace: When I awkwardly stepped into that church building more than a decade ago, those present could not discern my agony. But they saw me. They beheld me as another image-bearer of God, worthy of love, won by Christ. They offered table fellowship. They opened their homes and their lives to a stranger. They shared books, baked pies, and offered unconditional embraces. They enquired. They listened.

When I finally had the courage to admit to them my depression, they loved me even more. The table fellowship continued. The books still exchanged hands. The embraces just lingered a bit longer. The house visits increased in frequency. The prayers became more pointed, more fervent. They didn't reprimand me or offer advice. They simply partnered with me, holding on to me while the waves of grief ebbed and flowed.

Their efforts didn't chase away the darkness. They didn't cure my depression or jolt my mind awake with a burst of hope. But they did reflect Christ's love, and in so doing, buoyed me through turbulent seas. They reminded me, even while I was steeped in hopelessness and shame, even when I couldn't believe their words, that Christ lived and died and rose for me. And like a shaft of light glittering through inky waters, that truth - that love - penetrates through.

Like a shaft of light that truth penetrates through.

And Jesus says to Peter, "Tend my lambs." Jesus is saying to us today "Tend my lambs."