

**Easter 4B, 3<sup>rd</sup> May, 2009****Psalm 23, John 10:11-18****Shepherds**

The pages of Scripture this morning are verily bleating with sheep and oozing with the running oils of comfort and love. Hence the old name for this fourth Sunday in the Easter season – Good Shepherd Sunday. If this was a children’s talk, I’d have you holding up little sheep and baaa-ing, while a shepherd figure would gather you all up in wide outstretched arms. Sometimes we all need just that. Just to be held, just to know that when we walk in places of shadows, there’s someone guiding and caring for us.

Well, I’m going to follow some sort of tradition and talk about shepherds. If we all automatically equate the shepherd figures in these passages today with God or Jesus, which is pretty straightforward (and which is what theologians call Christology), then let’s do a good job – a realistic job - of colouring in this shepherd image of the Scriptures. Let’s not short-change ourselves of who this God is, which is what we can do if we translate these passages to contemporary, cute and domesticated images of shepherding. Shepherds and sheep of the first century and before don’t look like the Australian pastoral pictures we’ll all familiar with here in our great Aussie countryside. Our images –and the realities of Australian sheep farming life – are pretty tame compared to Jesus’ time and place. And be warned – Jesus, and the writers of our Scriptures, often unsettled their listeners, so they might well unsettle us, too.

The Old Testament –the Hebrew Scriptures – used the image of shepherd on a number of occasions to talk of God. Psalm 23, which we sang today, is a classic example. “The Lord is my shepherd”. When we come to Jesus, in John’s Gospel, chapter 10, we find the great shepherding image again. But there’s a difference –there’s not the same the same softness or gentleness. There was an idyllic quaintness about the shepherds of the Hebrew Scriptures, more ideal than real, which doesn’t fit what we know as the reality of the life and circumstances of the shepherds of the later centuries in ancient Israel.

Shepherds had a hard life; it was dangerous, risky and menial. Their job was to find water and grazing for the sheep –not an easy task in the semi-desert. They were exposed to the elements –heat during the day, and cold during the night. They had to roam far from home, pretty much cut off from human society. Most importantly, they had to be alert to human and animal predators which lurked in the rocks and caves and ravines. Sleeping out in the hills at night, they would herd the sheep into common pens –if available –to keep them safe. These pens were basically an area surrounded by a roughly built wall, with a door or gate into the fold which was about the width of a sheep. The shepherd would sleep across that opening, to keep the sheep in and the predators out. Then in the morning, the shepherd would stand outside the pen and call his sheep; and the sheep knew the shepherd’s voice – and that’s another text of John 10, and a sermon for another year.

The risks were multiple for the shepherd – not just risks with the dangers of the physical elements and the guarding against predator, but the survival of the

shepherd's family was dependent on the shepherd's safe journey to pastures and then back home again. If the shepherd lost too many sheep, the family's survival and security was threatened.

But there was another side to the image of shepherd. According to biblical social scientists<sup>i</sup>, by Jesus' time, "shepherds had become a despised occupational group", the lowest rung in a status-conscious, status-driven society. "They were generally ranked with tanners, butchers, camel drivers and other scorned occupations. Being away from home at night, for many nights, weeks, at a time -they left their families vulnerable and exposed; not being there, they were unable to protect the honour of their women; hence they were presumed to be dishonourable men. Often they were considered to be thieves because they grazed their flocks on other people's property". Thus they were the epitome of questionable honour among men. And in the society of that time, a family that incurred dishonour was simply marginalised, and was not acceptable in the community.

So, in Jesus' time, references to shepherds would be less about serenity than about survival. And so, here in John's Gospel, the image of sheep and shepherds would evoke great contrasts of meaning.

Those around Jesus, particularly the religious leaders, would have been all too familiar with the shepherd passages from the Hebrew Scriptures –most noteworthy, from Ezekiel 34, which struck out at the bad shepherds, the rulers and authorities of the time, accusing them of exploitation, using force instead of care, abandoning them rather than seeking for them, and neglecting their healing. In contrast, Ezekiel writes, God himself would become the shepherd, seeking the lost, binding the injured, strengthening the weak, feeding them with justice.

Those leaders watching Jesus, would have clearly known that Jesus' emphasis on the *good* shepherd, was a charge against them as the bad shepherds – just as Ezekiel described bad shepherds. And Jesus has just had a go at the Pharisees about their blindness, going on to imply that those charged with the care of the sheep are thieves who come to destroy the flock. The Pharisees would not have missed the accusation that they were the thieves and "hired hands" who acquiesced to the Roman colonists and did not care for the sheep.

Let's just pause for a moment and summarise: shepherds lived tough in their work of caring for sheep, in a lifestyle that marginalised them. Jesus is now describing himself as the *good shepherd*. "*I am the good shepherd*", he says.

Immediately, against this backdrop of real life shepherds, there's a disturbing clamour of contrasts. "I am" was a sacred use of words,; so holy was God's name that the Hebrew Scriptures ascribed the words "I am" to name the un-nameable Yahweh. Let's catch hold of the disturbance here – this man Jesus was already a questionable person – hanging around with social outcasts, he himself was on the margins of acceptability, like the shepherds of his day. Now he takes sacred words, joins them with an image that he now makes ambiguous: the rough and menial shepherd, ostracized outsider of Jesus' day, yet an ancient accepted and powerful image for God – God the shepherd; and

by very clear implication contrasts his being the *good* shepherd with those who should have been known as good but were far from it. And because of his alignment with the outcasts of society, what he is doing is turning a whole lot of ancient Scripture, and a whole lot of current politics and religion, right on its head. Scrambling the images, so that honour is cast onto those whom society would not honour, and those who would claim honour and leadership, exposed as frauds and exploiters. In the image of a despised shepherd, we find in Jesus the challenge to preconceptions: about God, about leadership, about inclusion.

The challenge isn't just for the people in Jesus' day, rawly confronted as they were with a description of God that included the menial –the lowly servant-image of lowly shepherd; an image that shot down any glamorised and elitist notions of leadership. The challenge is just as confronting for us too, even though the shepherd image is not as sharp for us. Will we allow our preconceptions of God to be challenged? Is it easier for us to just hook our ideas and ideals onto that which is more comfortable for us, like the comforting God of Psalm 23, without including the more abrasive and marginalised good shepherd of John 10? These images may strike a contrast, but they're not opposing and exclusive of each other. God, in Jesus, is comfort, God is love, God is our guidance and Jesus our sheep-fold gate to abundant life; and God in Jesus is also justice, God in Jesus invites and includes not the ones whom society labels as the winners and the socially acceptable, but includes and embraces the sinner and the ostracized, the down-at-heel and the seekers after justice. Think about who that might mean in the communities around us, and about how we personally respond to that and to them.

If we accept the invitation to join ourselves to this God in Christ, the invitation is to be all of that – nurturing and loving, embracing the menial, inclusive of the other, no matter how offensive and alien they may seem, ready to give up our lives for them, as did Jesus. How do you respond to the challenge?

[And a haiku, especially for those who came to the Quiet Day yesterday:

*The Lord's my shepherd,  
of the margins and centre,  
rejected, but Love.]*

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<sup>i</sup> Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1998 p.179ff