



Fourth Sunday of Easter

Sermon by Revd Margaret Place



8 May 2022

READINGS

Acts 9: 36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7: 9-17; John 10: 22-30.

“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.”

Good morning to our online congregation. Welcome to St Michael's Bryanston, and we hope you will truly know the presence of the Good Shepherd in your lives.

Given the overall theme of today's readings and collect, I thought it might be interesting to learn a bit about caring for sheep, and see why this is such an all-pervasive metaphor in the life of Jesus. After dogs, sheep and goats were the first animals to be domesticated in human history, and sheep particularly have been an integral part of farming and our food and clothing for a very long time. Taking this knowledge, we can see that those people in the bible knew what they were talking about, and there are fundamental things about sheep and their needs which haven't changed. And it's also true, that we share some significant characteristics with them.

So let's begin with Psalm 23. “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.” Sheep are animals which, like many grazers, have no defence at all against predators. They flock for protection, but a big cat or a wolf can get an easy meal unless they are fully protected. Even an out-of-control domestic dog who gets over-excited at these unusual animals, can, if he or she gets among the sheep, can chase them to death, cause ewes to abort their lambs and cause huge trauma amongst them. Sheep need a shepherd for care and protection, and one who will see to it that they eat and drink and can sleep safely. I'm sure we all agree, that capable as we are, and knowledgeable as modern science has made us, we are still dependent upon God when it comes to agriculture, health and climate change and we become easy prey to those who would wish us harm

“He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside the still waters.” Sheep have a split in their upper lip called a philtrum. Because they graze on grasses and not bushes and shrubs, this lip enables them to get really close to the ground and get every last bit of greenery. But sheep also tend to eat whatever is in front of them, so the shepherd has to move them on to other pastures, to give the first piece of land a chance to recover, and to make sure the sheep eat good grass, not less nourishing roots. Sheep are also quite fussy about their water. They won't drink stagnant water, and prefer running streams, so the shepherd has to make sure they get to the water that best suits them. To keep them happy and content, the shepherd has to lead them where it is good for them to go. How often do we feed our minds with those things that would harm us? In a world where education and communication are all-pervasive, we can easily lose sight of God in the many other ideas and ideals which vie for our attention and make us addicted to behaviours which take the place of God in our lives.. And our minds and souls cannot take too much dirt. We need God to show us where peace and quiet, and good morality exist. We thirst for that, and only God can provide the living water.

Sheep are not stupid. They can recognise up to 50 of the sheep in their own flock, and they know their shepherd, their sheep dog, and any other workers on their farm. While they do eat everything in front of them, they also know there are some plants that will heal them if they are feeling a little under the weather. But their basic instinct

is to flock. They gather together, and any dominant sheep who heads off in a particular direction will soon have all of them following. The exception to this is sometimes a sheep which is probably not as big or as strong as the others, so it may have a hard time establishing itself and securing a good bit of grazing to eat. It will then wander away and become separated from the rest of them and could get lost. The shepherd then has to look for it, and the flocking behaviour of the others makes them quite safe provided they are protected from predators. They won't run away, Confusion reigns when an uncontrolled dog gets in amongst them, or a predator wolf or cheetah, and they will run all over the place, trying to find one another and become totally discombobulated. I'm sure we recognize the flocking behaviour in ourselves. We have to be part of the crowd, and anything which disturbs that - new ideas, new demands upon us, conflict, disruptive social patterns - and we are thrown into confusion. And we all know that one individual who doesn't fit in anywhere and finds his or her identity outside of where s/he belongs. It takes a loving God to find them, to reassure them and to bring them back to the fold, and to ensure that they will always have enough to feed on. When the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune turn our lives upside down, the Good Shepherd restores our souls, and we can see normality even in the chaos, and in God we have peace, a peace of trust and confidence in God.

One of the reasons for this tendency of sheep to need to flock, and their proneness to confusion is that their eyes are different from other animals. They have rectangular irises. This gives them over 300 degree vision, so they are very aware of what is going on around them - an important form of early warning of predators or strangers. And those religious cards we see of a shepherd standing in the middle of a field of sheep are not merely decorative. The shepherd stands deliberately still in one place, and the sheep, wherever they are in the field, know he is there and the shepherd's presence enables them to keep their bearings and know they haven't wandered too far off. However the sheep's focused, front vision is rather weaker. They can see the grass in front of them, but 3D is a bit more of a problem, and it becomes very difficult for them in dark places or at night. It is almost impossible for them to negotiate dark valleys or tunnels, and the stick and rod and the crook of the shepherd keeps them on track and stops them getting off the path and getting lost, and the odd prodding which is needed is probably a source of reassurance too. We all have been through the valley of the shadow, and in those dark times we cannot see the way forwards. Panic alternates with distress, and we long for something, anything, to show us the way. We can know, from this psalm that the Good Shepherd is there for us, and the unseen prodding will keep us on the track until we get through it, and we move back into the light

The rest of the psalm moves onto a different metaphor - that of a host caring for an important guest. But in our Gospel Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd. He is very frustrated with those who are questioning his identity as the Messiah, and replies that those who follow him recognise him as sheep recognise a good shepherd just as the Good Shepherd, Jesus, recognises those who understand him and know what God is trying to do through him. Our sense of belonging as Christians rests upon our identity with Jesus, and the mutual relationship we have with one another and with him.

There is one other thing we need to know about sheep. A flock doesn't need that many rams, so when the baby rams are born, there are a couple who may be kept for breeding stock, and the rest are sacrificed. They are sent to the slaughterhouse (and where sheep are bred for meat, female lambs are also sent when they have reached the desired weight) and they are killed so that we can have the protein that gives us life. Except perhaps for lamb on a spit, we don't get mutton anymore. Everything we buy is small - lamb size, so we can cook it quickly and it won't be tough. The passage we read today in the book of Revelation speaks of the Lamb of God. In this case the metaphor is comparing Jesus to the innocent, young, sinless lamb slaughtered for sacrifice on the altar in the Temple, but the principle is the same. Just as we eat slaughtered lambs so as to have physical life, so the Lamb of God was slain - crucified on the cross - so that we could be freed from our sins and have eternal life. So the Good Shepherd becomes the sacrificial Lamb, and all this is to save us. The Good Shepherd guides us in our earthly lives, he saves us from our sins, and ultimately defeats the death, spiritual and physical, and with it, he casts out all our fear, our confusion, and lifts us up to that eternal life we share with our God. In God we can trust, and God sent us Jesus to demonstrate that love, that concern, and that willingness to subject himself to our wicked ways and be crucified, so we can learn through the resurrection that absolutely nothing will separate us from God.