

Easter 4 John 10:11-18

Our gospel reading conjures up one of those iconic images of Jesus, and image he used to describe himself, as a shepherd of the sheep. Not everyone in our society has experience of living alongside sheep, but their reputation is well known as an animal with less than the full complement of intelligence. However, those who work with and live alongside sheep will attest that they are not only clever, they can be sneaky too. Sheep have been known to work in teams to distract and separate unsuspecting walkers from their packed lunches. Sheep have been reported as breaking into kitchens and outhouses where food or waste is stored to grab an easy meal. Witness testimony from people in the know suggests that sheep are far from stupid, but they are nosey, risk takers and liable to find themselves in all sorts of trouble.

So, with this understanding of the mind of the sheep, it shouldn't really be a surprise that Jesus uses the analogy of shepherding when referring to himself. We are just like those sheep, wilful and curious, always wanting to see what else is out there for us, constantly testing boundaries deliberately or else just wandering off, attracted to something that takes us away from the safety of our Lord's presence and into the unknown.

We do it when the worries of the world become overwhelming and instead of laying our problems before the Lord in prayer we try to figure out how to fix them ourselves. We do it when we become mesmerised by the world's ideas of success and we seek after money and things, not starting out greedy, just wanting to make our way, but later on, more and more we need the next thing, we want just a little more security, we work a little harder and we sacrifice a little more. But the Lord is our shepherd, the psalmist says, we will want for nothing, everything we need is provided for us. We don't need to be overtaken by desire for these things, but rather we need to be mindful of the rich blessings we have received. We must want what we have rather than having what we want to truly understand God's gifts to us and to accept them gratefully. The Lord is our shepherd, he will make us lie down in green pastures, he will furnish a table for us and our cup shall overflow.

What a promise, what a hope. Being compared to a sheep doesn't seem all that bad when we come to understand how we will live as followers of this shepherd. He will not fence us in, he will not cage us and force our obedience. But he will speak to us with his wonderful calming voice, he will love us wherever we go and whatever we do. Each time we stray he will not only welcome us when we find our way back, he will come after us and seek us out. If we are in trouble he will offer assistance, if we are in denial he will wait patiently until we recognise him.

But today, as we approach Anzac Day, the additional responsibility of the shepherd of which Jesus speaks is all the more relevant and poignant. Jesus says as the good shepherd he will lay down his life for the sheep. That, it seems, is going way beyond the requirements of caring for livestock, but just as a sheep in the care of the shepherd is worth a great deal and may require physical intervention to stave off wolves and other predators, we are all the more precious and Jesus gladly lays down his life for our protection. When we reflect on this we find it impossible to imagine why our Lord would do this, how we can possibly deserve it, whether we could ever show that level of devotion to another. Yet the Anzac services all speak of that same understanding of sacrifice on the part of our service personnel on the battlefield. Their example of rejection of self for the greater good of humanity is in a similar vein

to the sacrifice of Jesus, not because he deserved it but because he willingly laid down his life in order to afford us a deeper relationship with the Father. As those who landed at Gallipoli over 100 years ago stepped into the most fearful of circumstances, they understood that the only way to survive was to fight, so also Jesus knew the only solution to the issue of humanity's relationship with God was for him to win that battle for us.

The Anzacs didn't win their battle, but they birthed an enduring legacy of the Anzac spirit, an understanding of how far a person can go for the benefit of another and how that feels not only for those directly involved but also for those back at home. War and the horror of war is never something we wish to be a part of, it can never be the first thing we try when resolving disputes, it must always be a last resort, if it needs to be employed at all. There is a paradox in that Jesus' whole ministry was focussed on the love and care we show one another, there is no call to arms in Jesus' teaching, and yet on the battlefield is where we see that same sacrificial love that Jesus showed at his trial and crucifixion.

Jesus is the good shepherd, we are the wayward sheep. If only we followed him more closely peace and justice could be a reality for the whole of humanity. We give thanks for all those who have shown sacrificial love to their friends, and we pray that the day comes quickly when that sacrifice is no longer one which leaders ask of their people.