Sermon for 4th of Easter Year A

Readings: 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

i

I rescued a sheep once. I know that will not sound very remarkable from someone who lives in New Zealand, but residing in Auckland, I see no more of sheep than any other urban dweller across the world. I remember hosting some Australian friends when we lived in England and how eager they were to take photos, not of our old architecture, but of sweet young lambs. They explained that Australia had many sheep, but being such a vast country, they had never been as close to a lamb before as there were when driving through the English Lake District.

The sheep I rescued had got its leg caught in the supporting stanchions of a feeding trough. I went up to it, threaded its leg back through the metal bars and off it trotted. I felt really heroic. It gives you a really good feeling to help an animal out of a predicament. I can see why the image is used so often in the Bible.

Not only is meeting a living sheep rather dependent upon your culture, so too is your opinion of them. Cultures develop their own traditional pictures of animal characteristics. In my culture, owls are wise, cats are indifferent, dogs are loyal, foxes are cunning and sheep are, well, stupid, frightened, lacking in any personal qualities and dumbly compliant. No one wants to be likened to a sheep.

So to understand the imagery of the Bible we need to think in their cultural terms about sheep and not in ours.

The flock could easily represent the bulk of the family or village wealth. Imagine the contents of your bank account and pension fund wandering the hills around your place in woolly jumpers and you’ll get the idea.

Usually Israel is said to be God’s flock, because like sheep they are valuable but vulnerable; they are defenceless and surrounded by aggressive wolves ready to devour them such Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece and Rome. We are aware of such references as Isaiah 53: “All we like sheep have gone astray.” Or of Jesus’ warning: “I am sending you out like lambs among wolves” (Luke 10:3).

This puts God into the role of shepherd, such as in Psalm 23: “The Lord’s my shepherd, I’ll not want.”

ii

In today’s gospel reading we are introduced to the imagery of the sheep pen. There would often be one large communal sheep pen for a village into which several flocks belonging to villagers would be brought for the night. The pen would be closed by a heavy gate and the single key entrusted to the shepherd left on duty overnight. This is the symbolism behind Jesus entrusting Peter with the keys to heaven.

In the morning each shepherd would come to collect his flock. He would stand at the gate and call – and recognising his voice – his own sheep would come out and follow him to the pasture. Most of us would assume a sheep is too stupid to recognise anything beyond a blade of grass, let alone a person’s voice.

Jesus says he is the true shepherd of the sheep and they know his voice and he will lead them to spiritual nourishment. Those who put themselves forward as shepherds of the flock are false prophets who enter the sheep fold over the wall and bring only confusion and terror.

In the summer months the flocks would be taken further away from the village into the hills onto the high pasture – like the shepherds still out in the hills around Bethlehem when Jesus was born. At night flocks would be put in smaller hillside pens comprising a simple walled area with a gap left acting as the entrance. The shepherd would lie down across the gap, using his body to form the door.

Jesus said he was the true door of the sheep fold and that no one can find spiritual pasture except through him. No one can enter the sheep fold and join the flock, except through him.

When Jesus refers to himself as the ‘good’ shepherd, he is recalling the prophet Ezekiel 34:1-16 which speaks of the unfaithful shepherds of Israel, the priests and religious leaders who have failed in their duties and who will one day be replaced:

Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves…I will remove them from tending my flock…I will rescue my flock…I will search for my sheep and look after them…I will bring them bring them into their own land…I will pasture them…I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak…

Jesus is asserting his Messianic role in this imagery. He is the Good Shepherd who will lay down his life for the sheep (10:11).

iii

There are many things we should take to heart from this rich passage. It has much to tell us.

Firstly, we can deduce that we are precious in God’s eyes. Any sane person will think of themselves as having worth and respect the worth of other people, but let us not kid ourselves that such philanthropic attitudes are universal. Just as in the days of Jesus when certain categories of men and women were judged to be of less worth, or even little worth, we still have many political and religious attitudes that discount the worth of non-believers, the State of Israel, gays, non-whites, and so on.

The equality of human beings is not something we can afford to take for granted. It was a moral value that had to be died for. Keeping that moral value will be just as costly. The Church plays a vital role in promoting such fundamental human values and we deny our Christian calling whenever we fail to live by such precepts.

The West believes it can safely do without such moral guardians in the modern world – but seeing what violent and malevolent moral views take hold in the moral vacuum we have created in the West suggests to me that those who are willing to proclaim, live and die by such values are far from being redundant yet.

We can also deduce from this passage that we are inherently vulnerable. Again, the West lives increasingly in states of denial about the human condition.

We rather enjoy frightening ourselves about our cosmic vulnerability in Hollywood disaster movies, but provided they have a triumphal ending for the survival of humanity, we can cope with the tragedy of the thousands and thousands of deaths before the heroes defeat the aliens, mega-quake, tsunami or deadly virus.

Yet in life outside of the cinema we have cossetted ourselves in our western affluence, our western medical services, and western technological prowess. We have assumed an air of invincibility that kicks away the traditional supports of church, community and increasingly marriage and family life in a new creed of individualism.

The sheep is a herd animal and despite the accumulated wisdom of human experience and religious tradition that we are our ‘brother’s keeper’, that we are group animals that can only thrive within community, we race towards the dream of personal freedom as if all the old ties of community such as shared morals, shared faith, shared endeavour were shackles on our freedom, rather than the glue that held us together.

Regaining some balance between personal freedom and obligation to the community is one of the most pressing needs facing the world at the moment. There must be some happy point between libertinism and totalitarianism.

Thirdly, we deduce from this passage that human society craves leadership. This is surprising in the light of modern individualism I have just outlined, but it seems to be a vestige of our human instinct that will not go away. Whatever our desire for individual freedom, the DNA within us still exerts its influence. We are a herd or group animal. We do feel the need to have leaders of the pack.

Pop idols, film stars, sporting heroes, political demagogues – all in their own way testify to this deep human need to have someone to lead the pack. Our quest for individual freedom might lead us in the opposite direction, but the need to have a pack leader never quite goes away.

We can all think of a string of rather dubious leaders of the pack that many of us have chosen across the world over the centuries. This passage reminds us there is a Good Shepherd who truly has the welfare of the flock at heart: Jesus Christ.

If we acknowledge we do crave leadership – we’d have to go a long way to find a surer, safer and gentler pair of hands than those of Jesus.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

**July 2016**