

Love Has Us

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 11 May 2014, by David Gill. Readings for the fourth Sunday of Easter were Acts 2:42-47, 1 Peter 2:19-25 and St John 10:1-10

The readings set for this fourth Sunday of Easter are an interesting mix.

First, the Acts of the Apostles gave us that idyllic picture of the post-Easter Church. How accurate the picture was we do not know, but the author seems to be indicating what he thinks the Church ought to be like: devoted to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers; to sacrificial care of the needy; characterized by worship, goodwill and steady growth.

Then, from the first letter of Peter, a far-from-idyllic picture of persecution. The author links that experience to the suffering of Christ. Why did the Lord suffer? Because people were going astray like sheep. He became our shepherd and guardian.

Finally, in St John's gospel, the sheep and shepherd motifs are developed further. So let us for a moment contemplate sheep.

Here, in the heart of Sydney, our four-footed woolly friends are not much in evidence. You can wander into Coles or Woolworths and admire the lamb chops, but that's about as close as you get. So let me remind you, my fellow city-dwellers, of a few things about sheep.

First, sheep are vulnerable creatures. If attacked, sheep have no claws or big teeth with which to fight back. They can't withdraw into a shell. They can't even run away. They are effectively defenceless.

Second, sheep are not very bright. Well, let's be blunt: sheep are stupid. One small dog can push them around, even when they outnumber the dog many times over. When brains were being handed out, the poor old sheep must have been out of the room.

Third, sheep are tasty, which if you are defenceless and stupid is not a good thing to be.

So sheep have problems. They need caring for. They certainly did in biblical times when threats abounded, there were no fences and walled enclosures were few and far between. Without a carer, sheep were in big trouble.

As are we, if you think about it. For human beings are very sheeplike animals.

For one thing, we too are vulnerable. True, we're good at fighting each other. People can invent fighter jets and sell them to the Australian government at astronomical prices. Load us up with alcohol and we'll gladly throw punches at whoever happens to be passing. We're not lacking in aggro. Yet, in many ways, humans are weak, confused and vulnerable. Ask any psychiatrist.

For another thing, we too are stupid. Scientists are almost unanimous in warning us of the perils of human-induced global warming, but who wants to know? We let our governments get away with doing precious little about it. Madness. How crazy can the human race get?

And tasty? Never having dined out on human steaks, I cannot say. You'd better ask one of the cannibals in the congregation after the service.

So sheep, with their need to be cared for, do bear more than a passing resemblance to us. The biblical writers chose their analogy well. The old General Confession, in the Book of Common Prayer, was spot-on: "Almighty and most merciful Father, we have strayed from your ways like lost sheep, we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, we have offended against your holy laws". Indeed we have.

However, more important than our sheepiness is God's shepherding. We wander. But the divine carer we have glimpsed in Christ persists in guarding us, suffering for us, worrying so much about one that's missing that he hunts high and low and will not rest until the wanderer is found and brought home.

Contrast that with some of the other understandings of God current today: God the cosmic blank, God the punitive law enforcer, God the nebulous spiritual something, God the warrior champion of Christians or Muslims or whoever.

The novelist Kurt Vonnegut suggests one of these alternative understandings of God. In his book "The Sirens of Titan," Vonnegut portrays a new religion arriving on earth from outer space. Its believers profess faith in God the Utterly Indifferent. They proclaim the not-so-good news that reality has a heart of steel: cold, unresponsive, uncaring. That God just doesn't give a damn: about you or me, or anyone or anything.

What a grim religion that would be. And what a contrast with the faith of the Bible. God the Utterly Indifferent versus God the Good Shepherd. A god who couldn't care less versus the God who could not care more.

How are we to speak of such a mystery? Hesitatingly, yes. Wonderingly, for sure. Conscious of the inadequacy of our words, always.

Yet how can we not try to speak of the unspeakable, to utter about the Eternal? We fumble for better analogies, more powerful metaphors, for such a God. The good shepherd, yes that picture works, at least it did in biblical times. But we need other pictures, too, for the One beyond all our picturing.

Such attempts at creativity may enlighten. They may also disturb. Remember Francis Thompson's poem entitled "The Hound of Heaven"? It likens God, rather shockingly, to a great dog that follows, follows, follows and refuses to give up the chase:

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
 Of my own mind, and in the midst of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter ...*

Until finally the runner collapses, exhausted. Only to discover that he had been fleeing from the very thing he sought: the persisting, inexhaustible love of God.

The best analogies are human ones. Speaking of the divine as "it" has limitations, for we need relationship language. No wonder we have learned to pray to "Our Father in heaven". No wonder, in recent years, we've discovered the value of mothering images as well. But let's go further.

Among the hymn-writers of our time is Brian Wren, a minister of the United Reformed Church in England. Twenty four of his offerings grace our hymn book. One that took me a while to appreciate draws on fatherhood, motherhood and age differences as well for its God-language, even scrambling a few gender stereotypes along the way. The resulting hymn is startling, but also thought-provoking. Listen to the way each of the six verses begins:

- 1. Bring many names, beautiful and good,
 celebrate, in parable and story ...*
- 2. Strong mother God, working night and day,
 planning all the wonders of creation ...*

3. *Warm father God, hugging every child,
feeling all the strains of human living ...*
4. *Old, aching God, grey with endless care,
calmly piercing evil's new disguises ...*
5. *Young, growing God, eager, on the move,
saying no to falsehood and unkindness ...*
6. *Great, living God, never fully known,
Joyful darkness far beyond our seeing ...*

We've not sung that hymn much at St Stephen's. We should. We will, one of these Sundays. If you want to practise it during the week and drive the rest of your household nuts, it's number 182.

Remember, however, that while the language we talk about God is important, our words and concepts should not be taken too seriously. What we may think, imagine, feel is not what ultimately matters.

One of the many theologians whose writings have managed to upset the Vatican in recent years was Father Anthony de Mello, a Jesuit from Sri Lanka. Somewhere he has written "Love is not something you produce; love is not something you have; love is something that has you".

Beyond all our pictures, all our metaphors, all our words, all our striving and our yearning, love has us. Call it/him/her the good shepherd, call it/him/her what you will, Love ... has ... us. And that is what matters.

Thanks be to God.

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