

THE SERMON for Easter 4 – April 30, 2023.

What an interesting set of readings we have this morning!

Revd Sue in the introduction to her weekly reflection on the Sunday readings, reminds us that the season of Easter is a time to explore what it means to be resurrection people, of what it means to belong to and follow the risen Lord. She says that we hear of the abundance of life into which we are invited and the generosity that is asked of us as part of that belonging. It is a rich and challenging mix that runs counter to many of contemporary western assumptions about how life works.¹

There is much in our readings which reflect this. While I want to talk mainly to our Gospel reading this morning, I want to mention our other readings in passing.

I love our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles and have often concentrated solely on that to the detriment of exploring the other readings.

In the reading, we have a snapshot of the earliest of the early church. The coming together, the sharing of resources, the love which was so foundational to our faith. There is something about the selfless living, of being Christ to each other which I find so attractive.

Just prior to these verses, Peter has been speaking to the crowds following the baptism in the Spirit at Pentecost, and we hear:

... and that day about three thousand persons were added. [Acs 2: 41b]

It was this lifestyle which was so attractive and drew people to this group – the abundant life of a resurrected people.

Psalm 23 is such a powerful psalm. It brings great comfort to those who are in need and the words are just so profound. Unfortunately, it being probably the best known of the psalms, it is a bit of “familiarity builds contempt” or at least apathy.

It talks of the shepherd leading his sheep into the best pastures, with easy access to good water which will refresh our very souls with abundant life.

It is the next bit which is possibly the most profound:

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me, your rod and your staff comfort me. [Psalm 23: 4 - APBA]

Have you ever walked or companioned someone through the valley of the shadow of death?

I remember one particular day, towards the end of my mother's life. She was dying, and we were waiting for my brother to arrive from the UK. She was suffering from delirium and, we discovered later, was severely dehydrated. My sister and I stood, mainly, either side of her bed for most of the day, walking with her, through what I can only describe as the valley of the shadow of death. As I have with many others, I shared this psalm with her and as usually happens, it brings great comfort to the dying. With Mum, it was a very holy time.

God is with us always, even at the times of our greatest suffering and trauma, but always holding out the promise of love, care and abundant life, whether in this life or eternity.

The reading from first Peter, calls us to cleanse our lives of the things which can hold us back from living a Christ-like life: malice, guile, insincerity, envy and slander. All negativity, all gossip, all dishonesty, so we can become living stones in God's kingdom – living abundantly!

This all comes together in the Gospel reading.

There is so much symbolism in this reading and if we aren't careful, we can miss the deeper meaning and understand fully what Jesus is saying.

For me, there are four clear images which jump out to me:

1. The sheepfold
2. The gate
3. The gatekeeper and
4. The shepherd.

This story is part of the series of “I am” statements by Jesus, and part of his discourse on the Good Shepherd and as this Sunday is also known as “Good Shepherd Sunday”, as often as not the focus is solely on the role of the Shepherd, and yet as we delve into the passage there is so much more in it than just that.

1. Let’s look at the “sheepfold”, what is it, what does it stand for?

In the Middle East and in parts of Africa, villages or extended families would often pen their sheep in a communal sheep pen on the outskirts of the village, or in a place of rich pasture. “One kinsman who knew all the shepherds was designated gatekeeper.”²

And so, the sheepfold was a place of safety where the sheep were housed all together to protect them from the wild animals and thieves.

2. The gate is interesting in this context because Jesus uses it in different ways.

Often in the sheepfolds I have just described, the gatekeeper or one of the shepherds acts as the gate by lying across the gateway. Jesus uses this idea when saying:

“I am the gate.” [In other words, it is he who lies in the gap, protecting the flock....] The only proper way into the fellowship of the flock is through Jesus. Those who enter by some other way are thieves and bandits.”³

He is the one who is prepared to protect the flock, lay down his life to ensure they are safe.

3. The gatekeeper is another interesting concept for us. He / she is the one who knows all the genuine shepherds and is responsible for protecting the sheep whilst they are in the fold, only letting in the shepherds who are responsible for the sheep.

4. Then of course there is the shepherd. “The shepherd has three tasks-to gather sheep, especially the lost; to lead to water and pasture; and to protect.”⁴ It is a position that is full of responsibility.

The Good shepherd is of course a common description of Jesus. Caring for each one of his ‘flock’, knowing each one by name, each unique character.

There is something about the gatekeeper which challenges us with the awesome responsibility, as committed Christians, we are called to be gatekeepers. We are responsible for allowing the true shepherd into his flock, allowing the voice of Jesus to be heard in the world, heard and recognised by those who would be in his flock. It is the gatekeeper’s task to let the shepherd IN not to decide which of the flock he is allowed to take out with him.

On another tack, with Jesus as the gate, all who would be shepherds of the flock, must pass through Jesus to get to the flock.... and “through which the sheep must pass to gain life, salvation.”²

Jesus said he came to bring life, abundant life.

Controversial retired American bishop John Shelby Spong has a creed which states that:

God is the source of life, and to worship God is by living;

God is the source of love, and to worship God is by loving; and

God is the ground of all being, and to worship God is by having the courage to be everything I can be

“therefore”, he says, “I build a world where every human being can live fully, love wastefully and be all that they were created to be in the infinite variety of God’s humanity.”⁵

For me this speaks of the abundant life Jesus says he came to bring. Whether we are gate, gatekeeper, shepherd or sheep, this should be our goal. To bring this kind of abundant life into a reality.

The reality of a God who wants us all to have abundant life;

- who is love, who laid down his life for us, who also wants us to love each other wastefully, not counting the cost in petty reckoning;

- who wants us to be everything our individual potential can give us.

This abundant life which Jesus promises his resurrection people is for those who watch how we live our lives, those who walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, but also for us as we seek to live our lives as best as we can, so we too can be living stones in God’s Kingdom.

Let us give thanks to our Shepherd for his many blessings and the abundance of his promises. Amen.

Revd Sally Buckley tssf
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

1. Revd Sue Lodge-Calvert *Belonging to the community of the Risen Lord*, as posted on www.companionsontheway.com on April 26, 2023.
2. John J. Pilch “*The Cultural World of Jesus*”.
3. Brian Stroffregen in his notes on this passage.
4. Trevor Burt in his Pew sheet notes.
5. Bp John Shelby Spong as quoted from a TV interview he did with Geraldine Doogue on the ABC programme *Compass*.