

Easter 4 GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY All Souls' 2025

Shepherding, nurturing love dtw

John 10.27-27 Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."

Each year, on this Sunday, we have a portion of John 10 as the Gospel. This year our focus and our theme is turned towards the intimacy of shepherd and sheep. "I have called you by name; you are mine. No one will snatch you from my hand". This intimacy may be lost on most Australians, not only city dwellers who rarely see sheep grazing, but also those who are used to huge sheep stations where there is infrequent contact between shepherd and sheep – and that, usually by 4WD or light plane or helicopter. But wait! Enter the sheep dog! The working dog! The muster dog! The intimacy of dog and owner might be a special Australian image for us.

Things were on a much smaller scale in biblical times – and are still in much of the Holy Land today. The shepherd often literally knew the sheep 'by name' and would seek out the ones that were lost or hurt or threatened by wolves and weather. Indeed, when Jesus talked about being "the gate for the sheep", it was not only that we would see the imagery of entering eternal life *through* him; the shepherd of old would often actually lie across ('lay down' at) the entrance to the fold as a human shield, preventing any from leaving and guarding them from marauding animals or thieves. Hence, "the good shepherd *lays down* his life for the sheep". (John 10.11) This Jesus does all the way to the cross in love for us.

I suggest that the Church needs to reclaim servant leadership and ministry in its teaching and life. Today we are reminded that the central nature of the Christian Gospel is *relationship* not belief. John 10 is all about relationship. It is about intimate, laying-down love – one for another. Is it any wonder that just three chapters later Jesus is washing his disciples feet and giving them a new commandment: "love one another, even as I have loved you"? John 10 provides a powerful mission/servant imperative. Jesus says elsewhere, "whoever would be great among you must be your servant,,, For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10.44-5)

Today our 9.30am Eucharist includes a baptism, and the imagery of the Good Shepherd could not be more appropriate. Christ the Good Shepherd has called Harry Leo Madaras, his parents and godparent to this place and to the waters of baptism. Jesus wants to have an intimate relationship with Harry which will be nurtured by his parents Jack and Amie, and godparent Jaxon. To quote today's Gospel, Jesus wants Harry to hear his voice and to follow him as Harry's guiding light all the days of his life.

In this very same chapter about the good shepherd (Ch 10) Jesus says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." God's gift of love in Jesus offers us a satisfaction beyond description. Abundant satisfaction is what we need in a world with its fleeting changes and chances. When people are in love, they are completely taken up with each other, they completely satisfy each other. God's plan in Christ is to gather up all things in one great celebration of love, for that is Heaven. Meanwhile, the Eucharist, or Holy Communion, which we celebrate Sunday by Sunday, is the 'Christian Love Feast' on earth.

The Greek word for this love that God has planned for us from the beginning of time is *agape*. It implies a disposition, an attitude of heart, mind and will that is deep and abiding, not superficial, fleeting and fancy such as you find perpetually in the soapies or reality TV. (eg Married at First Sight!!) Isn't it tragic that this rubbish is watched by so many? Many people become what they see, not just what they eat. Agape love goes far beyond the way the world tends to think of love. So much love we see and hear about today is conditional and laced with ulterior motives. This is especially and paradoxically so in the lives of personalities and celebrities – their relationships all too frequently fail because what has been left out all too often is a decision of unlimited commitment. John Powell wrote, 'Love is not a feeling, love is a decision'.

True love begins with the personal decision to get to know someone – that is what courting and engagement are for before marriage. Sadly, many young people today begin their relationships physically before they even know each other in person, and then confuse being 'in love' which is only the icing with the 'decision to love' which is the cake. It is only the decision *to love* that makes a relationship strong and lasting; icing is never enough, not for the long haul. Love is a Decision. It usually leads to 'falling in love' again, and again, over the long years of fruitful marriage. Jack and Amie, may this be your beautiful life along with your dear Harry whom we baptise today. And it's Mother's Day! What a bonus! Listen for the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd to guide you and may you walk lovingly and safely in green pastures in your beautiful home at Paracombe all the days of your lives. Amen