

7th May 2017 Sermon by Judy Youmans

The Shepherd and Guardian of our Souls.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” The psalm for today is the most famous of them all, the 23rd Psalm and our Gospel has Jesus speaking about shepherds. In the Old Testament, using the word shepherd generally refers to God himself and implied royalty.

The shepherd was a single man and was often the youngest of the family. It was a tough job. The mob of sheep was not in the thousands, it was a small number and the shepherd knew every one of them, what they looked like, their strengths and weaknesses and they knew their shepherds voice. Sheep were kept mainly for wool and so they would live to a good age, unlike New Zealand where meat is important and so a young lamb here is generally destined for the dinner table.

The shepherd carried a srip, a bag that held some food, bread, dried fruit, cheese, olives; a sling to protect the flock from danger and to shoot a stone just in front of a straying animal to send it back among the herd; a rod, used for catching sheep that were going astray, and under which sheep would pass as they went into the fold at night so that the shepherd could examine them carefully for illness or injury and finally a staff on which to lean and to protect having a club-like end that could be studded with nails.

Life was dangerous. The land was rough and grass was in short supply so that the animals had to travel in search of food and could easily slip down a ravine or get lost. As well, the predators consisted of wolves, bears and lions which could easily kill a sheep or a person.

In the colder weather the sheep kept close to the village and at night would be kept in a communal stall with the watch keeper holding the key to the door. In the morning, the shepherds would call the sheep and they would, each one, go to their own shepherd. In the warmer times of year they would range out in the hills and at night stay in a pen made of 4 stone walls with one gap for them to go in and out. The shepherd would sleep in the gap and prevent predators coming in and sheep straying out.

Because the sheep knew the shepherd they would follow him. There were no dogs to push the sheep ahead of the shepherd, they followed their master, whom they knew and trusted.

David was the archetypal shepherd king of Israel. He had been the youngest son, out caring for the sheep and unthought of when the prophet Samuel came to anoint the new king who would take over from Saul. His life wasn't easy. Saul saw him as a threat to himself and to the dynasty that he hoped to found as kings of Israel. David lived for many years as an outlaw working for rival kings and avoiding Saul who wished to kill him. Even when Saul and Jonathan were dead, it took some time for all of Israel to accept him as king and when he was king some of his sons rebelled against him, though admittedly some of that was self-inflicted.

In the gospel reading today, Jesus compares the robber with the good shepherd and in verse 11 (which we do not read) he says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep". He is the one that they have been waiting for, the Messiah, but a different Messiah. He is the one who will die for the sheep not the warrior king who will attack the enemies. King David was both at different stages of his life. The shepherd doesn't attack the predators he defends them.

The reading from Peter emphasises this. It's a quite uncomfortable reading, not reassuring or particularly comforting at all.

Peter wrote it from Rome where he was probably living under house arrest in the early 60s and where he was killed probably between 64 and 68 AD in the reign of the Emperor Nero. He is writing to the area of Asia Minor, the exiles of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia in what is now Turkey. Paul wrote his letter to Galatia but was prohibited from visiting Pontus, Cappadocia or Bithynia (Acts 16:7) but obviously the faith had spread there.

He is speaking to people who are slaves, in particular oiketai – house slaves. In Rome itself, the majority of the population were slaves. They had originally had a few slaves who had been captured in the early wars with other city states but over time as Rome grew into an empire their numbers grew so there were millions of slaves. The only people who worked were slaves. It wasn't necessarily a bad life and they were educated, doing such work as being doctors, teachers, actors, musicians, secretaries, and stewards, but they were always at the mercy of their masters. A slave had no rights, they could not appeal to the law or anyone for justice, they were merely a possession to be used by their master as he wished.

In the early church, however, things were radically different. All people were of equal worth and a slave could be the leader of a congregation in which his or her master was a member. This could lead to difficulties. Also it would not have regarded with approval by society in general. There had been slave revolts and they had been put down viciously.

Peter recognises the potential problems and sees the danger to the Christians. He tells them to obey the authorities and their masters, even if they were treated unjustly or cruelly.

His reasoning? The example of Jesus, who also was unjustly treated and even killed, but who did not argue or fight back. Probably most vividly in his mind is the scene of the Garden of Gethsemane where he, Peter, picked up a sword and tried to stop Jesus from being arrested. He didn't understand at the time and as he followed Jesus he denied him three times in his puzzlement and distress. But he found that in the end Jesus was the victor. What had appeared to be disaster God turned to victory.

The reading from Acts sounds quite idyllic in comparison. It details what has been called the 4 marks of the church.

1. Devotion to the apostle teaching who had the authority to tell of Jesus teaching that they had heard themselves. By constantly learning they could overcome the mind-set of the society around them and prevent the teaching of Jesus from fading away.
2. Fellowship. The common life of those who believed, sharing and supporting each other and more than a mere cup of tea or coffee after a service. They were a community, not isolated individuals.
3. The breaking of the bread. Coming together to worship and at the centre of their worship was the Eucharist the great thanksgiving where they shared in the bread and wine as Jesus had with the disciples at the Last Supper.
4. The Prayers. They were heaven and earth people. Both, not one or other. They lived on earth and were flesh and blood but they knew that they were also connected to heaven through Jesus otherwise how they lived made no sense.

People saw how they lived, how they loved each other, they hear the preaching of the good news and they joined them.

It seemed idyllic but there was always a threat and not long after, Peter and the apostles would be called before the authorities and told to stop preaching. Jesus had been crucified; they could not expect that the authorities would simply let them continue. In chapter 4 they are before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish authorities, in chapters 6 and 7 Stephen is arrested and killed and the followers of Jesus began to be scattered out away from Jerusalem. Eventually Jerusalem itself would fall later, after the time when these readings were written.

Peter is speaking to churches that may be starting to feel some persecution in their own lives as they sought to be followers of Jesus. They are to follow the example of Jesus and not to retaliate but to obey the appointed authorities. Like sheep they are to follow the shepherd now that they have found the good shepherd and recognized his voice in their lives.

Verse 25 reads, "For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls." The word for overseer (or in some versions guardian) is episcopos from which we get our word 'bishop'. Our church is very different from that of the early church but in the consecration service the bishop promises to oversee with compassion and patience the people of God committed to their care. How they do that varies with the circumstances that they find themselves in.

The Anglican Church is changing as our society changes and the place that it previously held changes. In the future it will look different and we are in this time of change as a diocese and also in our own parish as we seek a new vicar or priest in charge. This afternoon we have a consultation so that we can discuss who we are, where we want to go and the attributes of the person who can help us to get there.

Prayer: Help us to remember that we are followers of you Jesus, the good shepherd, the one who laid down his life for his sheep and who continues to lead us through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Help us to so experience your love for us that we grow in love for each other, bearing with each other's joys and fears, in laughter and in tears so that others will see in us that love and be touched and drawn to you. Amen.