

Acts of the Apostles: 4. 1-22

1 John 3. 16-24

John 10. 11-18

Humans crave to be cared for; to know that someone is watching out for us. We are, of all the species, the 'creature' that has the longest period where we need to be cared for, protected and fed by others. Without these things it quickly becomes apparent that, although we are in some sense the most powerful of the species, we are at the same time terribly vulnerable. This can be said of us individually and collectively. Together, we need good leadership – for someone to look out for our best interest. Without good leadership we are vulnerable to collective fears, to emotional contagions which whip us into a frenzy; to the deceptions of charlatans. I am the good shepherd.

Throughout the Hebrew scriptures the people of Israel are likened to sheep, not individual sheep but a flock of sheep. "We are his people, the sheep of his pasture", the Psalmist writes. Repeatedly the leaders of Israel are likened to shepherds. But their shepherding is often seen in a poor light. So, Jesus, as he describes himself as the Good Shepherd, echoing this image and the ancient longings for a shepherd that will give himself for the sheep. In this saying, *I am the Good Shepherd*, Jesus offers himself as the shepherd who lays himself down for the sheep.

This image contrasts starkly with the hostility of the religious leaders who round on Peter and John after the healing they have performed for the lame man. Peter and John have healed the man and raised him up – the term for resurrection - so that he can now enter the temple, which he had been unable to do for his entire life of more than 40 years. And much to the chagrin of the religious leaders, Peter and John are also teaching the crowds. As things go this is not their job. This is the job of the rulers, the scribes and elders. But, you may recall from elsewhere, we hear that Jesus taught with authority, unlike the scribes and pharisees. These uneducated, country bumkins continue the troublesome ministry of Jesus. Matthew tells us that Jesus had compassion on the crowds because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. I am the good shepherd.

The social norm of Jesus' day was that people should have become silent about Jesus' crucifixion and all that he had taught and stood for. Crucifixion was meant to erase a person's reputation and memory; for them to be never spoken of again. But the disciples will not forget; nor will they be silent. Peter says to the gathered leaders: we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.'

This week the policeman who killed George Floyd with such unflinching determination was sentenced to 40 years in prison. This was because people refused to be silent any longer. Those who witnessed the murder stood by, witnessed and recorded the brutality; and then shared the news. We all now know. There has been a shift in public discourse during this time, a significant one. In recent years, in the face of such brutality, family and friends of such a victim would call for justice. So often this 'justice', though, is simply a synonym for revenge; we want revenge; our family wants revenge! And we want the legal system to give it to us. But this time the call has been for accountability. Something has shifted, shifted to more a humane shared understanding.

In the last fortnight we have passed the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the conclusion of the Black Deaths in Custody Royal Commission. While there were many recommendations made in 1991, intended to change the scandalous levels of indigenous deaths in custody, the situation has got significantly worse. Indigenous people are vastly over-represented in our prison system, at the same time as we do little to address the underlying issue as to why crimes are committed, nor to find more culturally helpful ways to discipline and support people. How do we strengthen the village so that the village can properly raise the children which are their gift and their future? We seem both unable to ask nor answer this question? We seem to be silent, or at least mumbling on the issue. Meanwhile lives continue to be lost and families and their communities traumatised. What will it take for this to change? I am the good shepherd.

The writer of the first Letter of John asks: We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

When it comes to the question of whether people are free to live in safety, to be able to enjoy their lives without being harassed and helpless we are talking about a ‘good’. This a shared good, a common good, the common weal – an ancient notion of shared peace and prosperity; the kind of life can be lived with dignity and ease. Without these things, life is characterised by fear and dread. In the verse just prior to the start of today’s Gospel Jesus says: I have come that they might have life and have it in all its fulness. This is of course is not some kind of endless accumulation of goods but an inhabiting of all of the fulness of God. I am the good shepherd.

Regrettably the Prime Minister sought to pit Australians against each other this week – we who have the misfortune of living in the inner city and might make the mistake of frequenting cafés, wine bars or, heaven forbid, holding dinner parties and talking about social issues, have just been rendered irrelevant. This comment arises from the kind of mentality which believes there is not enough to go around; that there is a limited quantity of social or material goods and if some are to get what they need, if the earth is to get what it needs, then others will inevitably have to miss out. This mentality is being applied to the operation of the NDIS, to the issue of aboriginal deaths in custody, to the response to the climate crisis and the need for commitment and action, to the roll out of vaccinations. We are about the most prosperous country in the world. Where did all this miserableness come from? I am the good shepherd.

We are called to be resurrection people; to continue the pattern of Jesus’ life and ministry. To continue to raise people up into their full dignity of being made in the image of God. This is our calling; this is our joy. Peter and John say: we cannot keep silent about what we have seen and heard.

The longing for this fulness which the good shepherds brings lies deep in the human heart. Our calling is to work in the vineyard, to continue to embody this; to point to the reign of God where it can be seen. And we pray for all whose lives are weighed down by fear and oppression, whose lives are shrunken by circumstances or the impact of others. We pray for resurrection for them that the risen Christ may still be seen and, like the lame man, may dance and praise God.

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