

**The Good Shepherd**  
The Fourth Sunday of Easter, 25 April 2021  
High Street Uniting Church Frankston  
David Fotheringham

**Bible reading:     John 10: 11-18**

*May the words of my mouth, and our meditations, and our love in word and deed be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. **Amen.***

Our readings today include a lot of images of shepherds and sheep. The Bible in lots of different parts includes stories of shepherds as exemplars of leadership, and makes clear the expectation that leaders should behave like good shepherds who care about their flocks, who seek out the lost, who defend and protect and care. Today's images particularly focus on the idea that Jesus is the good shepherd, his goodness shown in his willingness to lay down his own life for the sake of the sheep – willing to give of himself, in sacrifice for the sake of the sheep.

That element of sacrifice make these significant readings for ANZAC Day, when, first and foremost, we remember those who have died from Australia and New Zealand in the course of war - what we call the ultimate sacrifice. Our lives would not look the same as they are if not for the war efforts, particularly in the World Wars. No doubt, among us there are many who can tell stories about family members' involvements, including stories of those whose lives were lost or forever changed. I want to acknowledge that, even as in our reflections I want to steer towards ways of understanding love in action, and the 'laying down of our lives' in ways that don't usually involve confrontations that lead to death.

When in the letter of John we are told that just as Jesus laid down his life for us so we also ought to lay down our lives for one another, the meaning of that is immediately unpacked with the rhetorical question: How does God's love abide in anyone who had the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? Laying down our lives is most often about setting aside our selfishness and using our resources – time, talent or money – to respond to a brother or sister in need. That can take lots of forms, the immediacy in it is key: this is not, in the first instance, about solving world poverty. It's not quite "charity begins at home", but it's quite like it: charity – or love - begins with our responding to the people we see around us, our neighbours and those near to us. That doesn't mean that it stops there, especially as we get to know people who are further away, such as those that the church has linked with in East Timor and India, where a response can follow from a need that is seen; and it is a natural and real expression of love. And even if we don't personally know people overseas, the comments in these texts about Jesus' care for people who are not in our own immediate flock is a helpful prompt that our care should not be limited to our own flock, either. And there are some actions that we might take for people whose needs that we see that might lead us to put something of ourselves on the line, like those who have been willing to be arrested in the course of trying to get action for the processing and release of asylum seekers in prolonged, indefinite

offshore detention. In the texts we have here there is a warrant for actions of love that involve confronting the powers that be – being prepared to lay down our lives. Like a shepherd, who in caring for their flock sometimes has to face up to dangers to protect the sheep, or to walk with them through the dark valleys.

I've come back around to the shepherd metaphor.

Long before Jesus described himself as the Good Shepherd in John's gospel, we can be certain that Jesus was familiar with and used the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, which we ourselves have said together this morning. This is a timeless and favourite Psalm. It is worth imaging it on Jesus' lips. In many ways it is an articulation of Jesus' own faith, which we are invited to share. It's a good Psalm to memorise, if you haven't already, and to read your own life into it.

When we imagine Jesus reciting this Psalm we can see Jesus addressing God, his Father, as his guiding shepherd. When Jesus, reciting the Psalm, evokes God leading him to still waters, we might recall how God affirmed love for Jesus at his baptism. When Jesus, reciting the Psalm, evokes God who is with him in the valley of the shadow of death, we might recall how after his baptism the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where he learned, or had reinforced, the wisdom of faith and the setting aside of temptation. When Jesus evokes God leading him in right pathways, we might recall God's leading in his meeting and interacting with a whole range of people, to proclaim and enact the grace of God. When Jesus evokes God restoring his soul, we might think of his trust that even after the darkest valleys of Gethsemane and the cross, God was preparing a table and a feast for him, a feast we get to share.

In John's gospel, when the metaphor of the Good Shepherd is applied to Jesus, and Jesus calls us to follow him, he calls us from a place of trust. Just as he trusted in God the Father, so we can trust in him, trusting that he knows us and cares for us.

If the idea of being a sheep doesn't really appeal to you – especially if you are inclined to think of sheep as not very bright – consider this: while cattle respond to being prodded and shouted at and herded from behind, in the absence of a kelpie if you shout at sheep from behind them, they'll turn around to you. In contexts of smaller flocks than Australia, they prefer to be led. So, when they know and trust the shepherd, they won't go anywhere that the shepherd will not go first, to show them that everything is alright. Which is not so stupid after all.

And when Jesus calls us to follow him, to lay down our lives in care for our sisters and brothers and neighbours, he is not asking us to do anything that he has not done himself. And so he calls us all. And in doing so, he invites us to share in the trust of the Psalm that we shall not need to fear, that we can be assured of God's presence throughout the journey, and that sacrifice will not be in vain, for the Good Shepherd's own life is given for us.