

Sermon 26 April 2015 Easter 3 B  
'No Need to Harden our Hearts' Psalm 23 John 10:11-18

*Prayer: O, God, our shepherd, restore our souls, lead us on right paths. Even though we walk through the deepest valley, we fear no evil; for you are with us; your rod and your staff – they comfort us. Amen.*

So – who has done some work already on the title and scriptures we've been given for today???? You all can because we print it in the newsletter a week ahead – *yes* occasionally we get it wrong as editors of the newsletter – but we're pretty good as a team usually!? I have to admit it is not really 'me' – but Ray and Jeannine's work week by week!

All that aside, our theme today is that there is 'no need to harden our hearts' and then the scriptures I am preaching from teach about shepherds and sheep! Well: shepherds and sheep; wolves and robbers; abundance and rest; safety and protection; deep, dark valleys and sun-filled plains; dying to live; belonging and being known; authority and commands; goodness and love – **all** as God's household. Cv

I *could* list more – but I want to invite an opening up of the scriptures so that we can start to explore a tension that is ever present in the scripture today and in our lives. In our humanity we have a default setting that drives us to seek safety – warmth, security, goodness, love... and we seem to have a society default setting that see's these things as 'soft' – weak – undesirable characteristics for success and power and influence and leadership..... because these are the things we need / must have want – right? Cv

Within our humanity and within the 'soft' of it we struggle and I think it is primarily because the 'soft' is all too often the place where our hurts are registered. Whether hurts by others, by ourselves, to others, to ourselves... **whatever** that hurt might be –physical / spiritual / emotional / verbal.... And we seem to have a societal default setting that see's wounds and hurts– as a weakness – and therefore as an undesirable characteristic for success and power and influence and leadership..... right?

And if as Christians we can recognise a struggle, recognise the tension of even just these few issues how much greater is our headache because we follow a Christ who **so proves** society and its characteristics **wrong**. What is it that we need to be able to follow Christ – and do as he did – proving society wrong – and risking our lives to do it. What is it that will allow us to trust the giving up of our life so that we will discover life? ***Dare we risk caring enough to die that we might live?*** Cv

**Jesus said** in today's text that even *when it was* a question of his life – **he** had the power / the authority to give it up – lay it down. This is not victim "speak", this is not the story of a soft weak man – is it? Our texts say not – society *would want* to / does market it another way! ->

Society around the shepherds of Jesus day, marketed them as disreputable – unsavoury – *perhaps our closest* group might be the homeless of our city streets. So shepherds had a poor reputation – despite their status within Hebrew scripture as being **one of the ways** they understood God to work.<sup>\*1</sup> It was a common image used to describe rulers from Egypt to Israel. They **did** understand it combined the need for versatile strength and a nurturing role. This image speaks about a mutual relationship / of engagement between leader and people. There are good models of it working well: King David and **not so** well – eg when Ezekiel complains about the 'shepherds of Israel' the religious leaders, and their failure to care for the sheep (Ezekiel 34). There is an assumption in the ancient world is that the government / the rulers have a caring, protecting, nurturing role for their 'sheep'. cV

So 23 Psalm is a beautiful description of God at work in this caring role. It is timeless and the comfort it gives is priceless. A part of its beauty for me is that it doesn't hide from life's realities. It reminds us that there **is** love, goodness, light, warmth and protection – and there **are** valleys – deep and dark and enemies and hunger and fatigue and low points in life. **All of life** is within God's 'knowing', and it is God's

<sup>\*1</sup> W Loader, <sup>\*2</sup> J Petty,

greatest pleasure to be able to bring us safely to a place of rest, restoration, health and goodness – heaven on earth now – and to come!

It is within **this** context Jesus declares in John's Gospel to be THE good shepherd. Just to make sure we hear – it is repeated! Verse 11 and 14! Then to make it even more significant – in John's Gospel he has Jesus's 7 'I am' sayings. \*2 Jesus says "I am the bread of life" (6:35), "the light of the world" (8:12), "the gate" (10:9), "the good shepherd" (10:11, 14), "the resurrection and the life" (11:25), "the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6), "the true vine" (15:1).

In addition to these seven "**I am**" sayings, John's gospel also has 7 pre-resurrection "signs". *Remember seven* is supposed to be the number of completion and wholeness, so then these seven "signs" and seven "I am" sayings give us a **complete** view of the ministry and identity of Jesus. Then within that 'complete' picture the fourth point is regarded as central.

For John in his gospel story of Jesus, central to our understanding of the ministry and identity of Jesus is that **he is the Good Shepherd**. The good shepherd, who in full authority and with full power will give up his life for those in his care, because that's what being a good shepherd, is all about. That's the model of leadership John understood Jesus to teach was the best, the strongest, the most life giving.

**But it's not** the most reputable, not the most favoured or even the safest – you have to be prepared to lose your life; you have to be prepared to take risks; you have to be prepared to work long hours with little reward – shepherds in general were / are amongst the lowest paid; you have to no have no fixed place to live because feeding your sheep good pasture means wandering around from region to region; it means to have to find your enemies before they find you; it means fighting snakes, wolves, robbers, ... everything and **everyone** that would **take the life** of those under your care.

This good Shepherd model is not about taking from the sheep – it's about ensuring / about giving life to the sheep. It's about knowing their needs – even their deepest and most private needs and doing what will benefit them the most. It is not an approved societal model of leadership which is about exercising power, authority, and success over / on people that takes from them; takes their voice / dignity / self-worth / respect / capacity to make their own decisions / **takes away life** in all its fullness. cV

I may be *exaggerating* differences in my contrasting of these models of leadership: one gives, one takes, one about caring / the other not – one is soft and one is hard – yes? But we are surrounded by messages from our society that to win / to be successful / to be powerful ... we must be hard – dispassionate – uncaring survival of self's interests first.... And this voice is loud – and this voice would drown out all other voices we might hear – including our good shepherd's?

And just as we are trying to work out all this – and distinguish between the calls on our lives, we **encounter the valleys** of hurt and pain and despair and our **instinctive action** is to close off / shut down / hide away – protect our "soft – self". **We harden our hearts** – and I have come to believe this is one of the most *destructive* things we can do to ourselves. It is also one of the most *difficult* things – not to do! Staying with the picture of the good shepherd and sheep – we want to be sheep, cuddled, pampered, surrounded by safe walls where no hurt, robber, pain can get us. cV

**Sorry** – that's not actually life in all its fullness! Dare I say it ? It's not biblical or Jesus way either. I was reminded this week that it is a saying of Jackie Pullinger: 'God wants us to have soft hearts and hard feet. The trouble with so many of us is that we have hard hearts and soft feet.' **Hard hearts** are a response to the voices that would drown out the call of the Good Shepherd; these voices do not care and take the life of the listeners. There is no need to listen to them and harden our hearts – the Good Shepherd's voice is what calls us into life – the hard way, the real way, the best way – His Way. Amen.