

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer”.

Today is the day in which we celebrate Jesus as the good shepherd, or good shepherd Sunday for short. Those of you who know a bit about me, may know that I crafted Bishop Murray Harvey’s pastoral staff for him. I do not say this to big note myself but to highlight that a bishop’s pastoral staff or crosier is rich with symbolism. Murray carries his to symbolise his role as the chief pastor or shepherd of the Grafton diocese. So why do bishops carry these pastoral staffs? The first recorded presentation of a crosier at a bishop’s consecration was in 633 C.E. at the 4th council of Toledo Spain. Initially, pastoral staffs were a simple shepherd’s crook.

Sheep were the most prolific domesticated animal of the Ancient Near East, and consequently shepherding is one of humanity’s earliest occupations. The Ancient Near East and Egyptian rulers have a long history of being called shepherds of their subjects. The Bible contains abundant sheep and shepherding imagery. Ezekiel 34 depicts God as a shepherd who will gather God’s scattered *sheep* from among the nations.

A good shepherd cares for the flock, provides nourishment (Ps. 23), and guards them from predators (1 Sam 17:34-35; Amos 3:12), thieves, and bandits (John 10:1). A shepherd carries young lambs in his arms or on his shoulders (Isa. 40:11). Ezekiel extensively treats the Old Testament imagery of the Israelite leaders as shepherds of God’s people. In fact, Ezekiel admonishes them for being neglectful and abusive shepherds because of their exploitation of God’s people.

The New Testament adopts the Old Testament ideal of shepherds as responsible leaders, amongst whom Jesus is portrayed by John as the Good Shepherd *par excellence* because Jesus is willing, to lay down his life for his sheep.

The New Testament depicts Bishops as shepherds of God’s people in the pattern of Jesus the Good Shepherd. On presenting Murray Harvey with his pastoral staff, I said the following words: “Murray, receive this staff as a sign of your pastoral office. Be to the flock of Christ a shepherd, not a wolf. Encourage the faithful, support the weak, heal the sick, bind up the broken, restore the outcast, seek the lost.”

So, what does it mean for Christ to be the shepherd of God's people, the shepherd of us?

For John, Jesus is this good shepherd because he is the Son of God who is the shepherd of Psalm 23. This is undeniable for John. Further Jesus knows each of his sheep intimately and calls each of them by name. He is the one whose whole purpose is the safety of God's flock. Jesus lays down his life so that his flock may have abundant life.

Our Gospel reading for today has two interconnected images. Firstly, the image of the sheepfold and secondly, Jesus as the gate to the sheepfold. So, what is a sheepfold? In Jesus' time sheep were put into sheepfolds – walled and gated enclosures – at night to keep them safe from predators, wolves and the like. In the morning, the shepherd would come to collect his sheep from the sheepfold. Alert to his voice, the sheep would follow him out upon him calling them by name. They would not follow a stranger but would scatter from him. Jesus then identifies himself as the Gate itself. The Greek literally translates as “the Gate of the sheep”.

By identifying himself as the gate, Jesus suggests that the way to the safety of the sheepfold is to enter through him and him only. Jesus' indictment of those who come before him as thieves and robbers seems to rest on his contemporaries' shoulders. Herod, the high priests and other Jewish authorities who were examples of exploitative shepherds. He is not referring to the giants of Jewish history, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, and the like.

Jesus again insists that he is the gate through which the sheep enter to be safe at night, and in the same vein, go out in the morning to find the sustenance of the pasture to sustain their life. As the method of entry and exit for the sheep, Jesus – the gate – is both life-protecting and life-sustaining.

So, what does this mean for us today?

In the stress and strain of the current global crisis that is the Covid-19 pandemic, we can feel isolated and alone, or even trapped by our current circumstances and living arrangements. The frustration with our life and liberty being constrained for the good of ourselves and the wider community can sometimes feel overwhelming. The fear and anxiety of catching Covid-

19 that we may feel when we do go out for essential purposes can feel like a crushing weight upon us.

Other than practicing good techniques to maintain our mental health in this time, we can rest in Jesus our saviour. John's sense of Jesus as the gate to the sheepfold, is that Jesus is our protector and life giver. It is through constant interaction with Jesus in prayer and other practices of the spiritual life that we find sustenance and abundant life in the full sense in the tradition of John's writings. Whether that be prayer, meditation, contemplation, bible study, or fellowship with others, albeit aided by an electronic device in our current times.

Today is the second day after the slight relaxing of the pandemic restrictions. An article I read recently on the effects of social isolation was titled: "We are in the dreaded third quarter of isolation, when – yes – things get weird". Its main point suggests that we as a nation have reached the inflection point where the frustration and hardship of being cooped up inside suddenly gets harder to bear. We can see the end in sight because we have flattened the curve of the infection rate. Quite naturally we may think it won't be too long now until this all is over. But medical and government directives say we are in this till the end of the year.

So, as we journey through the slow relaxing of the pandemic restrictions, may we gentle with ourselves, may we ever rest in Jesus our saviour, the Good Shepherd.