

Fourth Sunday of Easter – Year B

There is a note of belonging coming through today's readings. These ancient texts give us a glimpse of the spirit of solidarity that characterised the first communities of Jesus people. They were joined in commitment to their risen Lord and reinforced each other in their community gatherings.

Acts 4:8-12 This reading follows on from the account of the arrest of Peter and John in Jerusalem. They were in custody overnight and in the morning appeared before the council of officials, elders, scribes (=lawyers), Annas the high priest and members of his family, and were interrogated over their healing of the cripple who used to beg at one of the temple gates. Peter did not cower but boldly told the gathering that the man was healed in the name of Jesus of Nazareth. He pointed out that this very same body of influential men rejected Jesus and crucified him, but that God had raised him from the dead.

The leaders had no comeback and realised they could not punish Peter and John for healing a cripple. However, they ordered the disciples not to carry on speaking about Jesus. This had no effect because Peter and John said there was no way they would stop spreading the message about Jesus and so the council had to let them go for fear of the people.

Great things can happen when we let go and allow ourselves to listen

These two had definitely recovered from the fear that led them to abandon Jesus when he was arrested. Luke tells us that they were filled with the Holy Spirit and he shows them as men driven by their commitment to their Lord. The unwritten reality is that they were open to the movement of the Spirit. They had let go and abandoned themselves to the Spirit, demonstrating that great things can happen when we let go and allow ourselves to listen, appreciating that the Spirit moves in mysterious ways. When was the last time I stopped controlling, and surrendered to the Spirit?

Psalms 117/118 This is the last psalm in the group called the 'Egyptian Hallel' (Pss 113-118) because they partly focus on praising God for deliverance from enemies from the time of the Exodus from Egypt. These songs were sung at festivals and served to remind the people of God's *khesed* or loyal and loving kindness. Naturally, gratitude is the dominant motif in these psalms and here it is expressed in the repeated chorus of six rhythmic syllables *ki le'olam khasdo* – for to forever is his steadfast love.

We do well to daily think of things to be grateful for. As I write I am looking out at a gorgeous autumn sunrise over the treetops. It's a crisp 7^o Monday morning and I'll stop shortly and take our dog for a ramble through the bush behind our house. We'll cross two creeks and she will have a ball sniffing and exploring the scent of nocturnal wildlife activity. What's not to be grateful for, but to be lifted up and inspired by the enthusiasm of a beautiful creature whose love is unconditional? Be sure to name your blessings.

The key phrase in this extract is the builders' rejection of what becomes the cornerstone of the building. The cornerstone was cut with a 90^o corner that marked the joining of two walls. It determined the orientation and position of the entire structure. The metaphor in this song points to the reversal of worldly values that Jesus represented. Luke highlights this when he puts the words of Hannah into the Magnificat of Mary. The poor and lowly will be lifted up, while the rich will be sent away empty. The unlikely will be chosen while the proud and high-ranking will be brought low.

1 John 3:1-2 In this reading we meet a favourite theme in the Johannine writings that we are children of God. We read in the Prologue of John's gospel that to all who received and committed themselves to Christ were given the power to become children of God. This signals a familial intimacy and kinship with the divine. But the writer makes the point that our lifestyle needs to live up to this calling and status. He draws the obvious parallel that if the world with its skewed and self-serving values rejected Jesus then don't be surprised if we also are rejected and ridiculed. The ultimate hope is that our kinship with God will come to fulfilment when, as the writer puts it, 'we shall see him as he really is.'

John 10:11-18 The gospel extract is the familiar Good Shepherd discourse of Jesus. Familiar, but not always well understood. Notice how Jesus gets straight in. A good shepherd not only looks after his sheep but is prepared to lay down his life for them. This is pretty dramatic and it highlights the extent

of the shepherd's care. The hired hand runs off if the sheep are threatened by a wolf, because he is not connected with them; there is no sense of belonging or kinship. The good shepherd revels in belonging because he knows his charges and they know him, just as he and the Father belong to each other through mutual knowing.

We have seen before how the Hebrew verb *yad'a* means to know, but through experience, through personal connection. This is not like the intellectual knowing of a fact but the personal knowing through the senses. I know chilli is a hot spice, but if I haven't tasted it I don't really know it. Jesus and the Father have an intimate relationship – one knowing the other personally; Jesus and his sheep are intimately related through personal knowing. His position is, 'I love you and you are mine.'

The relationship is highlighted when Jesus alludes to the practice of herding the village flocks into one sheepfold at evening and the shepherds take turns in guarding the fold overnight. Next morning the shepherds come for their little flock and each one has a call or whistle that his sheep respond to. This is connection, belonging, this is intimacy. It is comfort, reassurance and security.

In contrast to the bad shepherds, Jesus affirms his own fidelity to his sheep

Jesus as a son of his beloved Judaism draws his spirituality from the Hebrew Scriptures and here he is using the language of the prophet Ezekiel. This prophet and priest was an exile in Babylon with his fellow Israelites and responded to their questions about the reason for their captivity. His reply was that they had been let down by their leaders, generations of whom had been unfaithful to God. He said they were bad shepherds who broke faith with the Torah of Moses and lined their own pockets instead of caring for their sheep. Jesus is clearly referring to Ezekiel 34 and, in contrast to the bad shepherds, affirms his own fidelity to his sheep, to the extent of giving his life to protect them.

The Johannine community of the post-70 era has been expelled from the synagogue because of the claims they made about Christ. Hints of this occur in John 9:22, 12:42 and the following:

They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God. (16:2)

In light of this catastrophic heartbreak they wonder if they have done the right thing by committing themselves to Jesus. Being rejected by the rabbinic synagogue they stand accused of treachery to Judaism. This passage, like the whole of John's gospel, is directed at reassuring them that they have made the right choice. Throughout the gospel, the Johannine writer points out that Jesus is the divine Son sent by the Father to bring life in its fulness to his people (Jn 10:10). For them Jesus is the way, the truth and the life.

Is the divine hand at work in good shepherds of today's community – pope, bishops, pastors – clerical and non-clerical? How would the Australian Catholic church be if there had not been a Royal Commission into institutional sexual abuse? Would the hierarchy have listened to the prophets who were critical of the lack of accountability in the governance and pastoral care of the Catholic community? Or would the comfort of the 'System' and 'we have always done it this way, so it must be right' reduce the need for listening to the voice of the prophetic?

What about me? Am I a good shepherd? What level of mindfulness do I bring to my own duty of care for those I am responsible for – family, co-workers, students? Is my pastoral care an occupational priority that truly enhances my role in the community, in the workplace? Do I radiate the kind of openness that gives encouragement to the people I meet? Do I pay others the compliment of genuinely listening to what they have to say? Am I aware of co-workers and students who suffer from poor health or from anxiety, feelings of inadequacy, abuse (verbal or cyber)? Do I actually walk with them in solidarity and support as a good shepherd? Am I a good team player as an affirming member of the community of the Good Shepherd?

Fear not for I have rescued you. I have called you by your name, you are mine. (Isaiah 63:1)



I have learned to be content with whatever I have. St Paul, Philippians 4:11



'I almost broke both my arms trying to hold open a revolving door for a woman.' Steven Wright

Laurie Woods