

29th April 2012 – Easter IV
Jn 10:11-18, Acts 4:8-12, Ps 40:1-5, Zech 10
07:30, 09:30 & 19:00 Grahamstown Cathedral

I am the Good Shepherd, says Jesus. And that apparently makes us the sheep. Have you ever thought that Jesus chooses a rather strange way to describe himself here? After all, shepherds were a little rough round the edges, men who spent their lives in the wilderness, and could often be a little uncouth. Perhaps for the disciples it was a less offensive image? God, and the leaders of Israel had often been referred to as shepherds. This is made clear to us in the reading from the Psalm and from the prophet Zechariah.

This third Sunday after Easter is called ‘good shepherd Sunday’. On this day the lectionary moves us from the post resurrection encounters that Jesus has with his disciples to the theme of shepherds.

Many of us may be familiar with the works of art depicting Jesus as the good shepherd. In these paintings or frescos the image is often of Jesus carrying a lamb across his shoulders. There’s a practice among the shepherds of Israel that existed in the time of Jesus and is still in use today, that shatters the harmonious connotations of this image. Sometimes, a particular lamb would repeatedly drift off away from the herd thus, continually placing itself in danger. In such a case, the shepherd would deliberately break the leg of the lamb and carry it across his shoulders. By the time the leg had healed, the lamb had become so attached to the shepherd that it never strayed again.

The Church has often referred to priests as the shepherds of the people and the Bishop as the shepherd to the shepherds... I suspect that there may some priests who find the notion of breaking a few parishioners legs rather appealing... no doubt, I’m sure that Bishop Ebenezer could think of a few priests legs who need breaking. Tempting as it may be to dwell on images of the dean carrying recalcitrant parishioners around on his shoulders, I would like us to consider some secular leaders or shepherds.

A cursory glance at Grocotts is enough to convince us that our leaders, our shepherds, are not very 'good'. I am sure many of you will have heard about the rape of the little seven year old girl by her teacher. The teacher apparently raped her in the school toilets. The article went on to expose the insensitivity and inefficiency of the police service. Then on page five, Zama Khumalo wrote of the irony of celebrating Freedom Day in the midst of our Government attempting to pass a law that will limit access to government information. Many have heralded this as a return to the dark old days of the apartheid government. Unfortunately, the leaders in the church are often as bad, if not worse than some of the secular examples I have quoted. The words of the prophet Zechariah may be equally applicable today: "the people wander like sheep; they are afflicted for lack of a shepherd." The 'hired hands' of which Jesus speaks could fit neatly as a description of many of our politicians.

Our world has become utterly suspicious of our leaders and chronically distrustful of the great institutions of our society. This means we are unhappy and mistrustful about our educational system, our religious leaders and police — let alone our representatives in government. Now to the hard question: why should we put our confidence in Jesus, How can we be sure that he is indeed a Good Shepherd? Have we grounds for thinking him trustworthy? Jesus speaks of the good shepherd laying down his life for the sheep. He asserts that he gives up his life freely, nobody takes it away from him, and that he has the authority to take it up again!

Jesus is good precisely because when he takes up his life again there is no hint of revenge. He does not set out to get back at Caiaphas, Pilate and the mob who bayed for his blood. When Jesus appears to his disciples, who scattered like sheep, his first words are of peace and not reproof. The miracle of the resurrection is that Jesus absorbed and did not transmit the deprivation of hate, violence and betrayal. Our concept of justice is all too often very different from that portrayed in the resurrection. We often speak of God being on the side of the victim and we attempt to invert the existing order. The temptation for us is to make new victims out of old oppressors.

One of the greatest historical tragedies of our epoch, according to Rowan Williams, has been the fate of Palestinian Arabs. Europe's attempt to atone for the nightmare of the holocaust has produced a new race of victims in the Palestinians, and so set up a further chain of terrorist counter violence. Williams is pointing out that because the Jewish people suffered so severely at the hands of the Nazis, their position was favoured over the Palestinians. In this way, Palestinians have become the new victims and are currently transferring the violence in acts of terrorism. This is a sharp illustration of the deadly circularity of oppression, when violence is transmitted rather than absorbed and forgiveness offered.

Closer to home we could think of the categories of race. Many people are still tempted to think that only whites are perpetrators of racism, as if black people are incapable of racism. This idea is grounded in the belief that the victimized group is intrinsically incapable of the kind of violence from which it is suffering. This in fact obscures the real atrocity of racial oppression: racism is not evil because its victims are good, it is evil because its victims are human. The resurrection is so important in our country, precisely because it holds the key to absorbing racial violence and has the power to unleash reconciliation.

But did Jesus, our good shepherd really have the power to take up his life again as he claimed in John's gospel? Daniel Harrington, the Catholic professor of New Testament, asserts that the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus consists of three parts: the empty tomb, the appearances of the risen Jesus and the success of the early Christian movement. I don't think that any of these offers conclusive proof, but I find the 'explosion' of the early Christian movement the most compelling.

From the fearful shell of a man who denied he had anything to do with Jesus, we encountered a bold and strident Peter in the New Testament reading today! How can we account for this radical transformation in Peter other than to acknowledge that for Peter the resurrection was real! Gone was his fear, instead there was an effervescent abundant life that was bubbling over. Peter and the others took over where Jesus had left off... the disciples had a strong sense of 'taking responsibility for God'.

This turn of phrase, about 'taking responsibility for God', I owe to the writings of Rowan Williams. He tells the story of Etty Hillesum who was a young Jewish woman in her twenties when the Germans occupied Holland — not a pious or conventional person at all, not someone with an explicit religious commitment.

Her published diaries and letters from 1941 to 1943 show how, during this terrible period in the history of her country and her people, she became more and more conscious of God's hand on her life, at a time when most would have been likely to feel more deeply sceptical about God.

Imprisoned in the transit camp at Westerbork, before being shipped off to Auschwitz where she was to die in the gas chambers in November 1943, at the age of twenty-nine, she wrote, 'there must be someone to live through it all and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times. And why should I not be that witness?' In a letter to a friend from Westerbork, she described her life as having become 'an uninterrupted dialogue with You, oh God', and she could write of sensing her vocation in the camp as being not ... simply to proclaim You, God, to commend You to the heart of others. One must also clear the path toward You in them'.

You and I may take solace in the lives of St. Peter and Etty Hillesum because they help to show us that the shepherd is good. As our faith is fed and strengthened we too should help open the way to God for others. One of the most profound ways for us to do this is to live out the resurrection in our own lives. How often we are responsible for transferring pain instead of absorbing it. The cycle of violence we see in Palestine is so often enacted in our own lives and relationships. The sickness of revenge and the poison of failing to forgive infect us with a paralysis which robs us of the abundant life our good shepherd has in mind for us. May the transformative power of the resurrection be unleashed in our lives!

Amen