

Laying Down Life

a sermon preached on the

4th Sunday of Easter

Sunday 3 May 2009

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

parish priest

Lection: Acts 4:8-12, 1 John 3:1-2, John 10:11-18

That God would desire all people be loved stands to reason – unless one assumes the creator to be malevolent. John writes in his letter:

“Beloved, let us love one another.
because love is from God;
everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.
Whoever does not love does not know God.
for God is love.
God’s love was revealed among us in this way:
God sent his only Son into the world
so that we might live through him.”¹

That God would desire those not belonging to our particular tribal association be included also stands to reason – unless one assumes the creator to be tribal and xenophobic.

“I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.
I must bring them also,
and they will listen to my voice.
So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”²

So on this fourth Easter Sunday, which the church calls ‘Good Shepherd Sunday’, we are reminded once again of the goodness of the great shepherd of the sheep, the shepherd long-awaited, proclaimed by the prophet Ezekiel as the one who would rescue Israel from the villainous, greedy and self-interested religious and political leadership.³ This is the shepherd who knows each and every sheep, who is not like the hired hand who abandons the sheep to wolves, who as one shepherd has one flock.

But the most startling and the entirely novel aspect of this shepherd – which is a kind of synthesis of the shepherd motif, the Lamb motif, and suffering servant motif in Isaiah – is that this shepherd will suffer for the sake of the sheep:

“I lay down my life for the sheep...
For this reason the Father loves me,
because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.
No one takes it from me,
but I lay it down of my own accord.
I have power to lay it down,
and I have power to take it up again.”⁴

¹ 1 John 4:7-9

² John 10:16a

³ Ezekiel 34

⁴ John 10:15b, 17-18a

Elsewhere in John's gospel Jesus tells disciples: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."⁵ The point of the shepherd image is not agrarian sentimentality and romanticism. What makes the shepherd image a uniquely-Christian symbol is the voluntary laying down of life, in order to take it up again.

This is what makes the Christian gospel truly scandalous, incomprehensible to all of us, church-goer and church-despiser alike. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's phrase continues to epitomise the affront of the gospel: "When Christ calls a [person], he bids [the person] come and die."⁶ But the last thing any of us wants to do is lay life down. Nevertheless, despite our refusal life is stripped from us involuntarily – through illness, accident, death, tragedy, despair. We do not voluntarily choose any of these forms of dying - they choose us. Our culture assumes that life is to be grasped – that property and possessions are to be acquired, knowledge to be gained, reputations to be staked, philosophies and ideologies to be protected, lands and houses and material comfort and well-being to be defended and secured. Only a fool would voluntarily let go of all such things. Only a complete fool would lay life down! A story was told to a group as inspiration to believe that anything and everything can be grasped, of a 69 year old man, an inspiring 'adventurer' who, following double heart bypass surgery challenged himself to run 7 marathons, in 7 days, on 7 continents – and he did! Now that is the attitude towards life which we laud and applaud and aspire to. *That* is the logic we understand – do not let go!

Christians, in spite of our shepherd's teaching, are not immune to this potent logic. In our prayer and our missionary action in the world as those who are sent, apostles, this is the common-denominator logic. Individually, when we feel we are losing our grip on some aspect of life, we pray to God that we might get it back. Communally, as church, when we feel that we are not making the impression and having the effect we think we ought, we pray to God that God might make us great and popular and numerous. The alluring temptation in such moments, individual and communal, is the temptation to reach for spiritual Viagra. My apologies to half of you – I'm speaking here explicitly and unashamedly as a man, and make no attempt to say what the equivalent of this might be for women (if indeed there is an equivalent). Spiritual Viagra is the seduction that we're not dying after all, that *we* can 'get it up again'.

The shepherd is good and loving and faithful because he refuses to take spiritual Viagra: "Remove this cup from me; yet not what I want, but what you want."⁷ "Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe."⁸ The shepherd is good, and loved, because he lays down, rather, his life for the sheep.

No one takes it from the shepherd. No one can make the shepherd lay his life down – he does it willingly, voluntarily, consciously. And here's the crunch of discipleship, which Bonhoeffer so accurately named: Jesus, the 'gate for the sheep',⁹ the good shepherd, received this command from the Father, *and he passes it on to us*: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."¹⁰ "Believe in God, believe also in me."¹¹ "I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these."¹²

Whatever it is that *we* grasp onto, which we feel we cannot let go of, Christ calls us to lay it down, consciously and willingly, in order that God might take it up again in and through us. This is the meaning of life in life abundant,¹³ new creation, resurrection. In our conscious, voluntary laying down of life, for the sake of Christ's sheep, Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia!

david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz

⁵ John 15:13

⁶ Bonhoeffer D, *The Cost of Discipleship*, London: SCM Press, 1959, p79.

⁷ Mark 14:36b

⁸ Mark 15:32 & parallels

⁹ John 10:9

¹⁰ John 14:15

¹¹ John 14:1b

¹² John 14:12a

¹³ John 10:10