

Easter 4

Sunday 12 May 2019

Readings: Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Rev.7:9-17; John 10:1-10

Reflection

I heard the voice of Jesus say, "Come unto Me, and rest; (so wrote Horatius Bonar in the nineteenth century)....

Lay down, thou weary one, lay down thy head upon My breast."

I came to Jesus as I was, weary, and worn, and sad;

I found in Him a resting-place, and He has made me glad.

Scientific research has shown that the human capacity to identify and respond to significant voices begins in the womb. Beginning in the second and third trimester of pregnancy, the human fetus responds to its mother's voice differently than to that of a stranger.

"My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me....they will never perish...no-one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:27...29)

When Jesus identified himself as a shepherd, his first hearers and gospel-writers understood what he was saying. Shepherding abounded in first-century Palestine, sheep being a source of food, a necessity for Temple sacrifice, and their wool as a staple for clothing and blankets.

The image of Jesus the Good Shepherd is not unfamiliar to us. We find many Old Testament images of God as the shepherd of Israel, especially in the psalms. In ancient Near Eastern tradition, the image of shepherd-king is one who brings leadership and providence. Moses and David were noted as faithful human shepherds.

By contrast, unfaithful or abusive religious leaders were identified as destroyers of the flock in the prophetic books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

The synagogue leaders - the Pharisees - claimed to be the 'true shepherds' of the people of Israel. But in today's gospel, the Jews challenge Jesus: *"If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly"* and Jesus responds *"I have told you and you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep"*

The early Jewish Christians - as a faith community deeply rooted in Judaism - must have experienced a great sense of loss when they were expelled from the synagogues by their leaders - the Pharisees. The umbilical cord was severed. Their expulsion must have torn at the fabric of their being, causing a sense of isolation, confusion and betrayal. The synagogue was not simply a place of teaching and worship, but the very centre of Jewish community – a place of meeting and fellowship, of law and order, of tradition and identity.

But John in his gospel, offers his hurting and somewhat lost readers encouragement. Jesus is the good shepherd. Jesus, the good shepherd, knows his sheep. He leads them out and goes ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. They are in covenant relationship with him. The good shepherd cares, gathers and protects - he leads his sheep in to a secure place, and leads them out. Even in places of alienation, they are 'held' and comforted. Jesus is not a stranger. He is not a thief or bandit – he is prepared to lay down his life for the sheep. The sheep will never perish. No-one will snatch them out of his hand.

Where do you hear the voice of Jesus today? Is it a personal call to rest?...to comfort?...to safety? Is it in the collective call for justice, equality or climate action? Do you hear the voice of Jesus through the love and laughter of family or soul-friends? In the 'voice' of Eucharist? In stillness and silence? In birdsong, bush or running waters?

'The Lord is my Shepherd....he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul'

In my imagination, I immediately return to Rakiura – Stewart Island – where I walked through birdsong-drenched primeval bush to gentle streams of water, where my tongue collected raindrops from dew-soaked ferns and moss-coated bark...

*I heard the voice of Jesus say, "Behold, I freely give
the living water: thirsty one, stoop down, and drink, and live."
I came to Jesus, and I drank of that life-giving stream;
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived, and now I live in Him.*

How do you quench your thirst for God?

'The Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'

The Revelation to John offers a striking image of radical inclusion - of life, love and tenderness given to an unnumbered multitude from every nation, from all peoples and tribes and languages – all singing their whole life back to God – nothing held back; all robed in white. The question is asked *"who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?"* *"These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; (is the reply) they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb"*

It would seem these are the ones who heard and responded to the voice of Jesus – those who did not flinch in the great ordeal - persecution by the Roman Empire. They remained true to their faith and kept their baptismal identity in Christ – 'washed in the blood of the Lamb.'

What does our baptismal identity mean to us? Does it involve singing our life back to God – nothing held back?

What is our great ordeal today? Is it the anguish associated with old patterns of racial superiority, of national domination, of environmental indifference and of economic mastery? Is it the anguish of unmet dreams of transformation in ourselves, our families, our communities, our Church? Walter Brueggemann states: We never really know about our Christian vocation in baptism until we get to the anguish. The anguish causes us to decide. Then, in the anguish of the 'old world' ending, we are aware that we are called to live and act differently – courageously obedient - to participate in a way that is healing, transformative, generative and hospitable.¹

How then, do we hear the voice of the shepherd?

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled”

“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty”

“He will guide them to springs of living water.”

“God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Just as for the first Christians, we can recognize the shepherd’s voice in prayer and praise, fellowship and teaching, in the breaking of bread, absolution and blessing. But sometimes the voice of the Good Shepherd comes unexpectedly. Sometimes we hear a great truth from the lips of a child, or hear inclusive love expressed most clearly from those we label ‘different’ or words of peace from those we label ‘enemy’.

The shepherd not only leads the sheep, but goes with them everywhere, into new pastures and old, and brings them safely home again. The shepherd is a constant companion. Even in the valley of the shadow of death, he is with us. He knows our names, and he knows our hearts. We are his people.

Anthony de Mello offers this parable: “A sheep found a hole in the fence and crept through it. It wandered far and lost its way back. Then the sheep realized that it was being followed by a wolf. The sheep ran and ran, but the wolf kept chasing him, until the shepherd came and rescued the sheep and carried him lovingly back to the fold. In spite of everyone’s urgings to the contrary, the shepherd refused to nail up the hole in the fence.”

We are rescued and provided for by the shepherd. We will need that help almost continually. That is true. But there is more. The shepherd wants us, desires us. That’s called Love. Sooner or later we will be convinced.

“I came that they may have life – and have it abundantly.”

Do you hear his voice today?

*I heard the voice of Jesus say, “I am this dark world’s Light;
Look unto Me, thy morn shall rise, and all thy day be bright.”*

*I looked to Jesus, and I found in Him my Star, my Sun;
And in that Light of life I’ll walk till trav’ling days are done.*

‘Alleluia! Christ is Risen!’

ⁱ Brueggemann, Walter, 2015. Chapter 25 *Beyond the Ordeal* in The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann Vol.2. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky.