

As we move through the Easter season our Gospel readings shift from those which tell of his resurrection appearances to passages from John's account of the Last Supper. These passages include material that is unique to John's Gospel. In these Jesus shares with his disciples insights as to who he is. Not who he is as son of Joseph and Mary, nor even as the teacher and healer they have followed through Galilee; rather these passages speak of who he is in relation to the Father and to the continuing Church community.

Today, in the first of these we will be reflecting on for the rest of Easter, Jesus talks of himself as the Good Shepherd. When we think of shepherds in our own context, we think of sheep in well organised farms, with the shepherd and his dog driving the sheep from one pasture to another, returning to his home at night. The shepherd in Jesus' time had a different relationship to his flock. He lived with them 24/7. He slept out in the fields with them; he protected them from wild animals. Whereas the modern sheep farmer rears his animals primarily for their meat and so will keep them for a relatively short period; the shepherd in Jesus' time kept his flock for their milk and their wool so he would have kept them for a much longer period of time. The shepherd would know their sheep and the sheep would know the shepherd. Quite apart from that, the shepherd would have been among the lower echelons of society. The very nature of his work would have presented severe difficulties in the area of ritual purity.

So when Jesus describes himself as a shepherd, he is identifying with the lower orders of society. He is a shepherd who knows his sheep, one in whose presence the sheep feel secure. As I have mentioned before, all this was brought home to me more than twenty years ago when Rachel and I lead a small group to the Holy Land. It was towards the end of

our stay. We had spent the afternoon on the hills overlooking Lake Galilee where we had shared a lovely communion service and we were resting on the grass waiting for our coach to come and pick us up. As we waited a shepherd strolled by walking ahead of his flock. One of the flock stayed behind to taste some tasty morsel. When he looked up the flock was nowhere to be seen, just us looking at him. Starting to panic he bleated furiously. From the distance came the sound of the familiar voice of the shepherd and the straggler rushed off to join.

The shepherd knew his own and his own knew the voice of the shepherd. If you think about it there was no point at which the straggler ceased to be part of the flock. There was no point at which the shepherd ceased to listen out for the straggler.

Earlier in the week, I was talking with the Confirmation Group about forgiveness. I asked them, could they imagine any circumstance in which their parents would stop loving them. They might get cross, very cross, they might impose punishments; but would they ever stop loving them. And they all replied that they could not imagine such a situation – which is a wonderful affirmation of their parents.

It is at this point that I want to set what we have been thinking about against a picture I frequently refer to in the Confirmation Classes. It is Rembrandt's picture of the return of the Prodigal Son. Like the lamb wandering off, the story of the Prodigal Son is a story of separation and return. Maybe the son had turned his back on the father, maybe he had even stopped thinking or caring about the father. But it is clear from the story that the father never stopped thinking and caring about him, never stopped looking out for the return

of his wayward son. In time, the son, returns to his senses and heads home rehearsing the abject apology he was going to make to his father as he offered himself as a household servant.

But he was still the father's son. The father, clearly watching out for the son, rushes out to meet him. The son's carefully rehearsed apology is smothered by a father's love as the son is welcomed, thoroughly undeserved in his own right, back into his place as son in the family.

The shepherd always on the look out for the flock, the father constantly looking out for his returning wayward son – both these are powerful illustrations of that fundamental truth of God that we read in the letters of John. 'God is love'. That is more than just God loves us. God is love, love is part of the very nature of the one who created us, who redeemed us.

Loved by God, we are sent out into the world to love as he would have us love; to love those who need our love, those in need but also to love the unloveable, the undeserving, those who would hurt and abuse our love.

In the words of a blessing I would sometimes use:

Go forth into the world in peace;  
be of good courage;  
hold fast that which is good;  
render to no one evil for evil;  
strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak;  
help the afflicted; honour everyone;  
love and serve the Lord,  
rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit;  
and the blessing of God almighty,  
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,  
be among you and remain with you always.