

The sheep and the shepherd.

I don't know if you've noticed but there's a common theme in today's bible readings. In John 10 Jesus talks about the good shepherd and the sheep, our reading from 1 Peter talks about sheep and the shepherd, and of course we had the most famous psalm of them all, Psalm 23 – in which David declares that the Lord is his shepherd.

Of course, the imagery of us as sheep, and the Lord, Jesus, as the shepherd is quite familiar to us. And it's a concept that we can relate to. We all know about sheep and shepherds, don't we?

You may have heard stories of missionaries and bible translators working in New Guinea, having difficulty properly translating 'the lamb of God' into local languages. They were completely unfamiliar with sheep, so 'lamb' made no sense. The only livestock they kept were pigs, but there was nothing symbolic about pigs – and saying 'the piglet of God' not only didn't make sense to the Papuans, but was also offensive to the missionaries.

You can read the story of the effort in the book 'Peace Child' by the Canadian missionary Don Richardson. The solution was to translate 'lamb of God' as 'Peace child' – which was a local custom of the Sawi people of New Guinea which conveyed the right concept, even though it wasn't a direct translation and the imagery was quite different.

But of course, we all know about sheep and shepherds, don't we?

I wonder, though, if we really get what Jesus in the gospel, and Peter in his letter, and David in that psalm were talking about?

Because even if we are familiar with how sheep are farmed, how it happens in Australia today, is quite different from how it happens in modern Israel, let alone how it happened in biblical times.

Of course, back then, the sheep were much the same!

Sheep are great animals, aren't they? Mighty and magnificent beasts. Think of all the football teams which have a sheep as their mascot. Think of all the flags and coats of arms that display sheep.

Think of all the sheep performing tricks at the circus... and of course the seeing-eye sheep that help blind people.

Well, if you can think of them, then you're doing better than me: Sheep are not known for their intelligence. They wander all over the place – from tuft of grass to tuft of grass. They're easily scared and known to get stuck in bushes, and fall off cliffs.

They're not generally fearsome, and they're fairly defenceless as well.

And yet, as Christians, if the Lord is our Shepherd, if Jesus is the good shepherd, then it follows that we must be like sheep.

And while that can be a comforting notion, the other side is that we are so often like sheep – we wander, we do the wrong thing, we are stubborn, we are foolish and so on it goes. The prophet Isaiah writes, as Peter referenced in his letter, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way" (Isaiah 53:6)

A sheep needs someone to look after it. A sheep needs a shepherd. And, in the same way, we need Jesus.

Near the beginning of today's gospel reading, Jesus says "...anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out."

A sheep pen is – or at least was back then, in Judea – usually a stone or mud-brick structure, sometimes partially roofed or sometimes built around a cave. There would have been a single gate, which was likely just a gap in the wall – and I understand that often the shepherd himself would sleep across that gap and effectively be the gate.

The pen served to protect them against thieves, robbers, and wild beasts, and the sheep would be taken into the pen every night, and let out every morning.

In Australia these days we typically drive sheep, follow behind them to keep them moving, maybe on a quad bike, and generally with some sheepdogs to keep them from going astray. But in Jesus time, they would have been led – it's

hard for one person to drive a flock of sheep... it's easier to lead them... but to lead them, they have to follow, the shepherd has to call the sheep, and as Jesus said "the sheep listen to his voice".

The sheep have to recognise their shepherd, but the shepherd also knows his sheep.

For a few years while I was at Meat and Livestock Australia, I worked for Dr Rod Cox. Rod was a lecturer in Agricultural Science based at Orange Ag College, and he was seconded to MLA for a project. He was an interesting person to work with, and he had various agricultural interests, one of which was breeding merino rams.

I was listening to Rod and another scientist discussing his merinos over lunch one day, and I distinctly remember him saying "3558 is a fantastic ram". He was raving about the qualities of 3558. I didn't realise it at the time, but Rod was being a good shepherd – he knew his sheep by name. Or at least by number, because it seems the convention is that whereas you name bulls and stallions, you simply number rams.

He knew 3558 though. He knew all about 3558. He cared for 3558. 3558 was, as Rod said, a great ram.

Rod showed that there needs to be that familiarity, that relationship, between shepherd and sheep.

Having described how the shepherd calls his sheep by name and leads them out, Jesus talks about how the shepherd goes on ahead, and the sheep follow him. They won't follow someone else, because they don't know his voice (10:5).

So we have this image of the shepherd going on ahead, and the sheep, rather than wandering all over the place, follow him. He's not driving them, he's not forcing them, instead, he's leading them.

In fact, if you think about it, he's not making them go anywhere he doesn't go first.

Jesus doesn't prod us forward or make us go somewhere He's not willing to go. He goes ahead of us.

And that means that quite often, we can't see what's ahead – and that's true for us as individuals, for us here as the congregation of St Ives Uniting, and for that matter for the whole church. We live in times of great uncertainty. Who could have imagined the things the world has gone through in the last few years? Global pandemic. Invasion. And more locally, fires, floods and storms. Of course we worry about the future, and what it will mean for us and the people and things we love.

But if we are following Jesus, then we can trust him to lead us through it all. He can see what's ahead because he's already there! And he can see what's coming up and he can help us avoid dangers and mistakes and help us to avoid drifting of his path.

It means that he's going ahead of us and he's leading us to metaphorical green pastures where we can lie down beside quiet waters – in the place where we should be, where God and his creation are reconciled, and where our souls can be truly refreshed.

If we're following the good shepherd, even through what seems like the darkest of valleys, it means we don't have to fear – as individuals or as a church - that our lives are going the wrong direction. If we are following the good shepherd, following Jesus through seeking his word and through prayer, then we can follow him with confidence. He is the good shepherd: he's not going to lead us off a cliff or into a desert.

Jesus goes ahead of us and he calls us all to follow him. Throughout the gospel accounts, Jesus calls people to come to him, to follow him. He called the first disciples to follow him, and they left their nets and followed him, he offered the Samaritan woman the living water, he offered himself as the bread of life. Jesus says, in Matthew's gospel, come unto him if you're burdened and he will give you rest.

Jesus doesn't demand tributes from those who follow him. Instead he gives freely: the living water, the bread of life, rest. If we choose to follow Jesus, then we receive those gifts. And most of all we receive life in Jesus: For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Or as Jesus says here in John 10, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full”.

Or turning to an older translation, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”

As the good shepherd, Jesus offers us all abundant life.

Abundant life. Full life. I think if we asked them, people on the street that would say that Christians don't lead very exciting lives. They don't have much fun. They're wowsers.

But following Jesus shouldn't take the fun and enjoyment out of our lives. God doesn't give us a rulebook that puts everything fun out of bounds. Jesus wants us to love one another, and the commandments that we have help us to do that. If we really do love each other, then we will do no murder, we will not steal we will not commit adultery and so on.

So, if we are truly following Jesus and listening to his voice then we will not be doing those things. But if we think we know better, if we follow our own ways, or if we listen to the voice or the voices of imposters, and we don't keep those commandments, then people will get hurt – and we'll get hurt too.

When Jesus taught his disciples the Lord's prayer, Jesus said we are to forgive those who hurt us. I reckon that is one of the toughest things to do, but when we don't forgive as Jesus wants us to forgive – and indeed as God has forgiven us, we'll get hurt. Anger, hatred, relationship breakups - and for that matter, high blood pressure, stress and ulcers.

It's a tough thing to do, but if we are following Jesus, we can take heart that Jesus has gone on ahead – he's already been there. As he was being crucified, he prayed “Forgive them, father, for they don't know what they're doing”

If we forgive, we are living out Jesus' new commandment. Love one another. We are freed from the burden of hate, we can find ourselves coming to know God's peace in our lives. And others begin to lose their power over our emotions. We become examples of God's forgiveness, examples of grace. We become witnesses of Jesus' love for us – and for all people.

God says we are to take time out – remember the Sabbath, and keep it holy. We should be spending time in prayer and meditating on God’s word. But life is so busy; there is so much to do.

Jesus took time out to pray. Not in a legalistic way where he would pray particular prayers at certain times and on certain days, but when the time was right. And when the time was right, he did withdraw from the crowds, he did withdraw from his disciples, to spend time with his father in prayer. And so should we.

We have the promise of eternal life with Jesus, but we also have the promise of abundant life when we are born again as followers of Jesus. To experience that abundant life, we just need to not simply call ourselves ‘followers of Jesus’, but we need to consciously and actively follow him in our lives.

While we recognise Jesus as the good shepherd, several times in the scriptures we see Jesus as the sheep. Probably the most well-known is John the Baptist’s declaration “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:28, NKJV), but also know the prophecy from Isaiah “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”

How do we reconcile these references with Jesus being the shepherd, and us the sheep? I think it’s because he took his place with us, became one with us. And offered himself, in his death on the cross, as the sacrificial lamb, paying the price for all of us wandering sheep.

But Jesus as the lamb and as the shepherd are brought together in John’s wonderful vision from Revelation 7:17 “For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

So... are we like sheep? Well... It’s not flattering comparison is it? But when we get down to it, I think we are. We’re not always that bright, we stray, we do the wrong thing.

And left to our own devices, we will perish as surely as a sheep left to its own devices the wilderness.

We might be like sheep, but we can be assured that we do have a shepherd. A good shepherd. A good shepherd who we can know, but who also knows us. A good shepherd who calls each one of us by name. A good shepherd who went like a lamb to slaughter in our place. A good shepherd who knows us and loves us and cares for us.

Not someone who comes behind us, beating us with a stick, and sending dogs to nip at our heels, but a good shepherd who goes in front. Who leads us, as we said earlier and will sing again soon, who leads us to green pastures beside quiet waters. Who has gone on in front of us all the way through the valley of the shadow of death and emerged victorious.

Jesus is the good shepherd who guides us all in the paths of righteousness, who provides for us even when we are in danger. Whose goodness and love will be with us all the days of our lives, and in whose house we will dwell forever.

Amen.