

**Sunday, May 3rd, 2020, Fourth Sunday in Easter: Shepherd Sunday**

**Readings: Acts 2:42-47, Psalm 23, 1 Petr 2:19-25, John 10: 1-10**

## **An Easter Society: Resurrecting the Victims**

### **Introduction**

What does an Easter world, a resurrected world look like? If as we Christians claim, Jesus' resurrection has as much to do with the transformation of life *before* death, as *after* it, as much to do with *current* life as the *after-life*; then *what* are the signs of this Easter, this resurrected world and *where* do we look for them?

Some time ago, some years ago in fact, I reflected with you upon the conversion, resurrection in the *converted individual*, in the transformed human being. We spoke of the necessity of two stages to Christian conversion: *deconstruction*, where my old-world view, my place in it and how I live, what I do, is surrendered; and *reconstruction*, where the new world view and my place in it is lived out. I spoke then of this deconstructed-reconstructed behaviour in the experience of both the apostles, Paul and Peter: Paul on the road to Damascus and Peter by the lake. In both cases the men re-align their world views and alliances: both *understand* that witnessing to a resurrected world means criticizing their then current religious, social and political perspectives characterized by death and injustice; both *move* from associations with power in one form or another, to relationships with the victims of power; and both *ultimately share* the lot of power's victims, the lot of Jesus himself – violent death. Both *pay the price* as conduits for the vision of a resurrected, transformed world, a world with no “broken beaks”, to quote a well-known children's story.

So much for the resurrected, deconstructed-reconstructed individual: but can we speak of something larger, an *Easter reconstructed or resurrected society*? I think so! After all that is what Paul and Peter lived and died for. What then might it look like? In thinking this through let's use again this deconstructed-reconstructed framework and let's begin with the Gospel reading, moving later to the film *Philadelphia*.

### **Reading**

This reading from the Gospel is the opening section of John, chapter 10, where Jesus refers to his sheep and himself as the sheep-gate. In effect, this is just the beginning of a discussion concerning sheep, sheep-gates and shepherds that takes up the whole of the chapter. Because we won't be coming back to chapter 10 again in this cycle of readings, I want to speak of the chapter as a whole, digging down into the imagery, since it is the imagery that takes in unexpected directions.

On a first reading we pick-up that this is about Jesus speaking mysteriously, enigmatically about his sheep who recognize his voice and those others who do not. On a first reading, it all seems rather sweet, reassuring: after all we instinctively read this passage through the Christian lens of us as the sheep and Jesus as our Shepherd. But there is more to this sheep-

shepherd image than that. This imagery about sheep is not about a picturesque pastoral scene: and this is where the theology changes. The context to this chapter is distinctly disturbing, as Jesus is depicted walking in the precincts of the Temple of Jerusalem, the centre of religious, liturgical and political power, the centre of ritual slaughter of sheep as sacrificial animals for the Temple festival.

Behind this scene stand two levels of violence: the first, the celebration of the Feast of Dedication (*Channukah*) recalling the Maccabean revolt years before, where violence was deemed as a legitimate social solution to the Jewish struggle against Rome: it was a horrifying bloody event, in Jewish history.

The second level of violence attached to the Temple is less about an historical event, and more about the very Temple system – its sacrificial system. The sacrificial system was the foundation of a theologically justified class arrangement or scheme, internal to Judaism, where rules of ritual purity keep the various parts of society in their place; women inferior to men, and outsiders inferior to insiders. In short, the purity system ensured, facilitated discrimination, the purity system guaranteed victimization, where significant minorities were deemed to be black-sheep, where significant minorities, while maintaining the system through their conformity to it as they offered sacrifices, were at the very same time, its victims.

What is significant in this chapter, is that Jesus embraces, owns the ‘sheep’, Jesus identifies with those who are *used* by the purity system to maintain it. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, because he defends them, he stands with them, even to the point of his own death.

From a Jesus’ perspective then, the fundamental sign of an Easter, a resurrected society would be one that does its best to address the difficulty, the injustice of victims and victimization. This would be part of society’s *deconstruction*: eliminating the abuse and the beginning point of reconstruction or resurrection.

### **A Question**

But there remains a question, which this chapter, does not answer and which actually remains a mystery within Scripture and for us as modern human beings. It is this: why do we victimize, in our individual and collective behaviour? What is it within us that drives us to objectify people and groups as in some way or another unclean, impure, unacceptable, dangerous to us? Why do we construct societies and institutions that permit, indeed promote such actions? A few weeks ago, I watched the first and second episodes of the ABC series, “Revelation”, which focused on child sexual abuse, in particular in the Catholic diocese of Newcastle. It was an extraordinary event, as I listened to the sincere responses of the convicted paedophile, Fr. Vincent Ryan. In answer to the question, why he serially abused and victimized numerous children, he could not give an answer, he could not explain his actions. There was a terrible hole in the interview, because there was no response. As you watched Ryan, you could see his own genuine inability to answer. He was as much a

mystery to himself as he is to us. Why do we victimize? Why the Jews, why the Armenians, why the Rohingya?

What I can say, in the face of my unanswered, and perhaps unanswerable, question, is this: Jesus was the crucified victim, not so that we may continue to victimize and scapegoat this group or that, but so that there may be no more victims, no more scapegoats. *The cross is all about deconstructing social models of abuse and the resurrection, the cross is all about constructing alternatives which are life-giving for all, not just some.*