

4th SUNDAY OF EASTER ESSENDON 2021
GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY & ANZAC DAY
Jn 10.11-18 AA 4.8-12 1Jn 3.1-2

Recently, I watched a documentary series on YouTube, titled *The Death of Yugoslavia*, based on events following the death of strongman President Josip Broz Tito, in 1980. It took another 6 years or so, for the cracks to widen and for terrible violence to break out between people who had long been literally neighbours. Once again, the evils of nationalism were on full display, with the evil and paradoxical phrase *ethnic cleansing* becoming part of the language. This conflict too was between ethnic groups of Catholic, Orthodox and Islamic faiths, with the precepts and principles of those faiths well lost in the hostilities, reminding us yet again of the horror and dehumanizing effects of war. When will humanity ever learn?

As we acknowledge with appreciation and gratitude, those who gave military service to our country, on Anzac Day, we also recall the horror, suffering and devastation of war. The measure of loss is not just for the dead, but also for those who survived and suffered the long term aftereffects of what was first known as shellshock, then war neurosis, now PTSD, not to forget their families who were also affected in a permanent way. We continue to hope for, work for and pray for peace and healing in our troubled world at such a time.

Did you know that we have a parishioner here aged 97, Laurie Larmer (who actually went to school with my Dad at St Pat's Ballarat in the 1930's)? At 22, he was an Australian Halifax bomber pilot with the RAF in 1945, piloting 9 bombing raids on German cities. In 2015, 70 years later, he wrote to the mayors of those cities, to express his regrets for the many civilians killed and injured in the attacks. He received 6 responses, expressing appreciation for his thoughts, one stating: "*There is hardly anything better than your letters to show how far reconciliation really stretches. Enemies can become friends indeed, and your letter and the reaction in Germany has clearly shown that.*" And Leunig even did a cartoon to acknowledge Laurie's apology. We do need to accept that World War II was very much a justified war, to counter the dark evils of Nazism, Fascism and anti-Semitism.

And now, for more peaceful reflection, here we are, back to John's Gospel, where less parables of Jesus appear, but the two main bucolic images presented by Jesus relate to himself as the *Good Shepherd*, with us, the People of God, as the sheep, and the *True Vine*, with us as the branches. They were powerful rural and relevant images at the time, but not so much for us city dwellers in the 21st century. Nevertheless, we can easily enough reflect on the meaning and application for our own lives and discipleship.

It helps to know that powerful, but flawed King David started off as a humble, simple shepherd before getting the call to go higher around 1000BC, at the start of the royal dynasties of Old Testament Israel. The king was meant to care for all of his people and to provide for those in need, at least in theory! Jesus takes up the same image, but with a very different result, given that his kingship is not quite what was expected of the Messiah to come, as he speaks of laying down his life for his sheep, his Kingdom not being of this world in terms of power and wealth, but of justice, love and peace.

In his time, the shepherd had a heavy responsibility to keep an eye on and care for all of his sheep, as we hear in the parable of the lost sheep. Here, John presents Jesus as the shepherd who care for all he encounters, even to the extent of looking past the local flock, beyond the call of duty.

What is more, the careless or negligent shepherd of the day would be more interested in looking after himself than his sheep, fleeing when danger arose, without too much care for them, or knowledge of them individually. The good shepherd is faithful, protective and present to his sheep. Jesus takes up this model and extends it, speaking of knowing each one intimately, having a personal relationship, just as he has with his Father whom he reveals in his own person.

Brendan Byrne SJ interprets Jesus laying down his life for his sheep, as "*his surrender to death will be a supremely free act of love; the Good Shepherd giving his life for his sheep. And the self-giving love that impels him to do this is simply an extension of the love of the Father that lies behind and energizes his entire mission.*"

The origins of pastoral care, now seen as critical in our secular lexicon as well, come from the metaphor of the shepherd and so pastor, caring for his flock, his people. It does not imply blind obedience, however, but

leadership by service and a personal relationship with each individual, not just as an impersonal number, to be easily replaced.

You may well have seen the photo of Pope Francis, with a little lamb around his neck, reflecting his role as chief pastor or shepherd of his people. There is a similar image of Bishop Vincent Long of Parramatta. At the same time, Francis is not just into photo opportunities (nor is Vincent), but has demonstrated through his words and actions, that he sees his role as universal, in terms of engaging with leaders and members of other faiths, and not just those of Christian origin. He might have faced criticism for it, but isn't it clear enough that Jesus' ongoing outreach and mission was to all whom he encountered along the way, in his mission to proclaim a God of love, mercy, forgiveness and healing.

And Brendan Byrne takes this up, broadening the interpretation of Peter's words today in Acts of the Apostles, about Jesus being the only way to salvation, whereas that was at a time of intra-Jewish debate about whether Jesus was the promised Messiah. Vatican II, in 1964, clearly speaks of other great faiths reflecting '*a ray of the Truth (Jesus Christ) who enlightens all.*' The need for engagement in inter-religious dialogue, understanding and respect is obvious for all, including non-believers, as faith cannot be imposed, even though for most of us, it is caught and taught as we grow up! As mature adults, however, we have to make our own choices, in the light of it all.

Jesus speaks of those not of his own flock, which could well imply divisions occurring in the early church communities, and outside John's community for whom his Gospel was written. If we look at the world today, we can see the proclivity for human divisions and misunderstandings, on all sorts of levels. Even within the diverse religious traditions, there are varying practices, rituals and even beliefs, as time has moved on, in differing circumstances and cultures.

Traditionally, this weekend is known as Good Shepherd Sunday, with a focus on vocations, primarily religious, but, to my mind, the call is for all to respond as faithful disciples of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who loves each one of his flock, and who wishes that love to be shared in our lives and relationships.

john hannon

25th April 2021