

**EASTER 4C 08-05-2022 (Mother's Day) The Reverend Lorna Green**

Acts 9:36-43; Ps 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

*At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.' Jesus answered, 'I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one.'*

Revelation 7.9-17

*After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,*

*'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!' And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, singing, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.'*

*'These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for 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.'*

Today is Mother's Day, and although we celebrated Mothering Sunday back in Lent I know many families will be remembering their mothers and grandmothers- those who are still with us as well as those who have gone to God. So Happy Mother's Day!

I read somewhere that Mother's Day is one of the most popular days of the year for people to visit cemeteries; it is a tradition for many families to remember their late mothers and grandmothers.

For people who are grieving, today's readings contain words of comfort and reassurance, but they are more than just nice words: they may be challenges to our perspective on life and death.

Last week we heard from Grahame about the conversation between Jesus and Peter, as told by the writer of the Gospel of John, in which Peter is given his role as Shepherd of God's people. Today we hear of Peter living out his role and doing what Jesus did: healing the sick, and even raising the dead. In today's passage from John's gospel we hear Jesus referring indirectly to himself as The Good Shepherd, as he answers the challenge of those in the Temple who have asked him to declare himself as the Messiah.

This episode follows directly after the speech in which Jesus makes one of the "I am" statements contained in this gospel: "I am the good shepherd". The Good Shepherd leads his sheep, who recognise his voice.

He protects them with his life, and we are reminded of the words of Psalm 23 in which the Shepherd leads the sheep to green pastures and protects them as they travel through dangerous, dark places.

Those who gathered round him as he walked in the Temple were not convinced that Jesus was the Messiah.

He answered their challenges by reminding them of his actions, saying that the works he has done in God's name are proof that he is who he claims to be. He has healed the sick and given sight to the blind- what more do they want?

He went on to talk about eternal life, the life that Jesus offers to those who hear his voice and follow him. This eternal life is the gift of God the Father and cannot be taken away.

How did those questioners respond to what Jesus said? They wanted to stone him to death. Why on earth, we might think, would they respond so violently? Because Jesus said, "The Father and I are one", which was shocking blasphemy in their eyes. How dare any human being declare himself to be equal to God? Israel traditionally saw its leaders as shepherds, and its greatest king- David- had started life as a shepherd boy.

No wonder the religious leaders found what Jesus said so offensive: not only was he saying he was a king, but God's Son as well. They were not able to recognise his voice, and the authenticity of what he was saying.

So if Jesus is our Shepherd, what does that mean for us- the sheep? How do we feel about being sheep? As a lifelong urbanite, I don't know a lot about sheep, but it seems to me that they are not very bright animals, even a bit stupid, and I'm not sure I like being thought of as a sheep!

The Shepherd metaphor, like any other metaphor, can only be carried so far. It is useful because it carries connotations of care, nurture, and protection: but it is inadequate if it assumes the followers of the Shepherd are to be like dumb animals. It is positively harmful if Christians are encouraged to be mindlessly obedient, unquestioning, and submissive followers: that way leads to the dangerous mentality of a cult. The metaphor is useful if we think of ourselves as those who recognise our Shepherd's voice and gladly follow him, knowing that he cares for us and will be with us in the presence of our enemies. He will be with us in the dark and dangerous valley of shadows, as well as in the green pastures of peace and plenty. Jesus will be with us through and beyond death because eternal life includes now: it doesn't begin after we have died, it has begun as soon as we have recognised his voice.

The vision of promise we heard in the reading from the book of Revelation has brought comfort to untold numbers of Christians, and I am always reminded of the Ode that is spoken on Anzac Day:

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning  
We will remember them.

The author of Revelation is not just referring to soldiers, but to all Christians who have suffered, who have 'come out of the great ordeal', which probably refers to religious persecution. The vision is of people from every place and time worshipping God along with the angels, and the promise is that they will suffer no more.

Anyone who has lost a loved one, whether through war or violence, illness, age, or accident, can find comfort in the knowledge that Jesus- our great Shepherd- shelters and cares for them, and their suffering is over as God wipes away their tears.

Last week we heard St Peter being commissioned to be a shepherd and a leader and were reminded that God uses the most unlikely people in the most amazing ways. This week we hear how he takes up his shepherd's crook and gets to work. He listened to the voice of Jesus. He went on to suffer imprisonment, beatings, and eventually martyrdom: but he held on to the promise that Jesus would be with him always. When we think about the end of our own lives- if we do- we might not feel as confident as the apostles seemed to. We might find ourselves wondering- what if I'm not good enough? What if none of this is true, and death is really the end?

Remember a couple of weeks ago when we talked about Thomas and his need for proof that Jesus was really alive? The prayer of the father of an epileptic boy who asked Jesus to heal him came to mind: 'Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.'

If anyone understands our fears and doubts it is Jesus, our shepherd. He has promised to care for us- and he will always keep his promises.