

### **John 10:11-18**

One of our most significant days on our calendar is Anzac Day. An enduring image of Anzac Day is Private John Simpson Kirkpatrick's famous work as a stretcher-bearer at Gallipoli in 1914. Using one of the donkeys brought in for carrying water, Private Kirkpatrick transported seriously wounded soldiers day and night through enemy fire and exploding shrapnel on the back of his donkey, so that they could get the medical attention they desperately needed. Day after day he risked his life to save the lives of others.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of May 1915, Private Kirkpatrick would risk his life for the last time, killed by machine-gun fire while carrying two wounded men on the back of his donkey. The heroic feats of 'Simpson and his donkey' which have such a prominent place in ANZAC history is perhaps one of the clearest analogies from human experience to illustrate what God is like. Simpson ferrying the wounded and dying to safety on the back of his donkey is like the picture of God that the Psalmist paints for us in today's Psalm, Psalm 23—the Lord is our shepherd who travels with us even through the very valley of the shadow of death.

In today's Gospel Reading, Jesus proclaims himself to be the Shepherd that Psalm 23 speaks of. He says: "I am the good shepherd."

He is not like a hired worker whose only interest is in his wages because the sheep do not belong to him and he is therefore not really invested in the care of the sheep. This is ultimately seen when a wolf comes to attack the flock. In the face of such danger, the hired hand abandons the sheep to preserve his own life, leaving the sheep at the peril of the wolf.

But a shepherd has a responsibility to protect his sheep. To the Jewish audience Jesus was originally speaking, the image of a shepherd protecting his flock in the face of a ferocious wolf would be a familiar one. The Mishnah (an authoritative interpretation of Jewish law by the Rabbis) state that it was the legal responsibility of the shepherd to defend the sheep if a wolf attacked the flock. So if a wolf came the shepherd would stand between the wolf and his sheep because they are his sheep, and he defends them. And so the Psalmist says: "Your rod and your staff, they comfort me".

When Jesus says that he is the Good Shepherd, he is saying that he is a shepherd like no other. He is *the* shepherd, with a unique excellence, because he is the shepherd who lays down his life to protect his sheep. If the wolf wants to get his sheep it will have to be over his dead body.

What's all this talk of shepherds and wolves about?! When he speaks of the wolf, I think Jesus is referring to the devil, who comes to kill, steal and destroy. Since the very beginning the devil has been like a wolf, trying to plunder God's flock and steal God's people away.

But God's intention has always been for all people to be in relationship with him and share in his fullness of life. He created humankind in his own image, to know him and be his representatives on earth. After God had made everything else he created Adam and Eve as the pinnacle of his creation, and we hear in Genesis that God declared his creation "was very good". It was very good because it was just as God had intended. Whatever God commanded came into existence. His words brought it about. All through Genesis we hear the words: "God said...let there be...and it was so"

Then the devil came...not with a ferocious attack but subtle deception, planning to put a chasm between the human race and God. He said to the woman:

"Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

The woman said, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

"You will not certainly die," the devil said. "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3:1b-5).

Where animals and even inanimate objects obeyed the voice of God, Eve and Adam, with free will didn't. "Did God really say?" It wasn't so much a temptation to take a bite from an apple but to be their own authority and determine good and evil. They fell to the Devil's trick to think they knew better than God himself. They only thought

of themselves, without stopping to think of how their abuse of freedom would have consequences for others. And it has the worst of consequences for others—their putting God aside meant that all humanity has inherited this condition as part of our nature, so that in humanity's natural state, the self is the focal point of everything.

Because of the sinful nature, human beings naturally evaluate everything through the same lens Adam and Eve did—the self. We decide what truth is and no one else should dare tell us otherwise. Genesis is written off as foolishness and people put their faith in the Big Bang and evolution instead, which give no hope of a Creator and Redeemer. Society sees boredom as the great devil and does whatever it can in the name of entertainment to banish that devil away, attempting to sooth fear and anxiety, or search for meaning and identity, or meet unmet needs in whatever way we can. Like sheep we follow our consumerist Western culture that says we are only significant and worthwhile; we only have value, dignity and purpose if we buy the latest stuff or measure up to the latest fashions, and so we live our whole life to gain the approval of others.

The Ten Commandments are dismissed, because morality is what we decide it should be, differing from one person to the next. The self says that we have a right to whatever we decide to have...even if that means hurting and exploiting others, and even if it means causing a world war. We evaluate relationships through this same lens—we cut those off who don't measure up to *our* expectations, and we keep searching until we find people who do. We decide who is worthy of our attention and favour, and who is not.

We share in the consequences of this autonomy too. Just as Adam and Eve hid from God and blamed each other and even him, from the moment of our conception there is separation between us and God too. We can't know God by our own reason or come to him. This separation is an eternal one as the wages of sin—death—has come to the human race. This isn't God's problem, it's ours. But God took the initiative to rectify it and redeem us. God didn't decide who he should forgive and under what conditions. He sent Jesus into our world to be our Good Shepherd, and lay down his life on the Cross, even for those who would reject him. Jesus says that his Father commanded him to do this. There, on the Cross, Jesus took our place and laid down his life. That was the price God paid, the sacrifice he made, to redeem the world by his Son's holy and precious blood, the perfect sacrifice for our sins. There on the

Cross, Jesus stood between the wolf, the devil, and broke the power of the kingdom of darkness for us.

That seems to present a problem though, doesn't it? If a shepherd gives his life in the attempt to protect the flock, he actually can't ensure the safety of the sheep. Once the shepherd is dead, his sheep are then easy prey. But Jesus, the incomparably good shepherd, laid down his life with the purpose of taking it up again. Jesus has not fled from the powers of evil and death but confronted them head on. He has shepherded us through the valley of the shadow of death and by rising from death itself is ever present with his saving help.

With all the talk of sheep and shepherds and wolves it's not surprising that this fourth Sunday of the Easter season be known as "Good Shepherd Sunday." Historically today was called by the Latin name *Misericordias Domini* [note to reader: pronounced: misery-cord-ee-as dom-i-knee] "The Merciful heart of the Lord". For it is there on the Cross we see the merciful heart of God, laying down his own life in Christ for all people, even though we don't deserve it.

God delivers his mercy, love and grace and everything that his redemption of us means personally in baptism. He has given us all the saving benefits of his death and resurrection at the font. It was in the waters of baptism that our old nature died with Christ, and he made us a new creation, that we might live in the new life he won for the world. By our strength that's impossible to do, so in baptism God united us with Jesus to share in his own death and resurrection, buried with him by baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life—sharing in God's own life, forever.

God has washed our sins away and has given to us his own purity and righteousness, so that not even death can separate us from our Good Shepherd. We were among those whom Jesus was speaking of to his original audience two thousand years ago: "*I have other sheep that are not of these sheepfold and I must lead these to myself also.*" He says about us: "I am the good shepherd and I know my sheep and they know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father". For us to know Jesus and him to know us is to go far beyond intellectual knowledge. It is a deep personal relational knowing. It is to say in faith: Jesus lived his sinless life and died his innocent death *for me*. He is *my* Saviour. I belong to him each day and forever.

We may not know all that God is doing in your life. But Jesus is our Good Shepherd knows each one of us, more closely than anyone else. He knows all our fears, he knows what we need in our daily lives and the pressures we face: struggles with health, financial pressures, a failed business, bullying at school, academic difficulties, relationship breakdown, or our feelings of being unimportant and unloved. Jesus knows our frailty, our fears, our sin. He loves us because he laid down his life for us and took it up again to prove it. Listen to our Good Shepherd as he speaks through the Scriptures, his words of life. Through them, he will lead us closer to him that we may share in the same faith as the Psalmist and dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.