

## Sermon 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2018

### SEEKING TO RESTORE DIGNITY AND PUSH BOUNDARIES...

Have you ever imagined what it might have been like to have known Jesus? To have walked the hills of Palestine with him, listened as he shared the profound spiritual wisdom we now find in the Gospel stories and parables, seeing first-hand the healings, exorcisms, hearing the conversations, feeling the compassion as described in the Gospels? Have you ever imagined?

Have you ever imagined the 'good shepherd'? What is the first picture that comes to mind?

**PIC** Pictures of a Jesus with flowing robes, cuddling a tiny lamb, while other sheep lie peacefully at his feet.

Really ... ??

Only a town-y would conjure up such a picture!

**PIC**

By contrast, the tough shepherd image of one forced to live outdoors and on the fringes of society as an outcast, with an 'honest' and 'trustworthy' 1st-century reputation. I wonder what 21st-century comparison

would be, to that rough, smelly, shepherd of dubious reputation could be?

I find our representation of words and art of scriptures to be overly sanitised and sentimentalised, which in one sense are less than truthful.

The ancient shepherd of Palestine or Asia Minor had to be tough, often worked in areas of sparse growth, frequently amid danger from wild animals and rustlers protecting the flock, especially at night... John 10 reflects this less than an idyllic world. The serene Cuddly Lambie image gives way to a picture of tension: a shepherd doing his job to the utmost; dangers which threaten the sheep... and which will kill him. Life and death dance together, it was and continues to be a hard world for the peasant Palestinian, for the lesser people.

11yrs ago I walked for 5wks the Camino Santiago, 750km, From the French side of the Parnies to Santiago and out to the most western headland, Finisterre of Europe sticking out into the Atlantic Ocean. The journey follows a very Roman Catholic trail going back to the 9thC. It is lined with Monasteries & Nunneries. Most of them offer hospitality to the traveller, and some continue to be places of worship with active religious orders, all of them have what we would call typical religious icons, of crosses and some sanitised and some with grotesque figurines of Christ.

PIC

8yrs ago Kim and I walked for 4wks a small coastal portion of Turkey, called the Lycian Way 500km. In contrast to the Camino, there were fewer places of Christian Architecture, but many places familiar in scripture,

## PIC

Ephesus is one such place. Something I didn't notice at the time, but the writer Dr Barry Andrews notes: "throughout Turkey, none of these [Christian places of worship] depict the most familiar image of Jesus, namely the crucifix, Turkey, the birthplace of Christianity as we know it. But what one finds are mosaics, wall paintings and figurines showing Jesus as the Good Shepherd, tending his sheep in a pastoral setting .... (BAndrews. *UUA Shelter Rock website*, 2009)

Even from very early times depictions of Jesus where, not the pheasant backwater Gallean, but often depicted in Roman Toga, attire.

The first crucifix appeared in Germany in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Before that, the symbolism of the church was very different. As Val Webb says in her book ***Stepping Out With the Sacred***, "While Western art was absorbed with images of a twisted body on the cross as a bloody sacrifice, Eastern icons focused on Christ victorious over suffering and death, the serenely noble GOD-man." (*Webb 2010:157-58*)

Initially, I wondered how these readings fitted into the theme I have led you on.

Two things stand out for me. Those are:

(i) Pastoral.

(ii) Power.

(i)

The tough 'good shepherd' of the biblical stories loved the 'sheep' enough to restore their dignity to them by ignoring the rules about who belonged or didn't belong, where!

The shepherd did this by helping peasant families and workers and other 'outsiders', to resist the shame and worthlessness with which the taxation, farming policies, and religious codes had labelled them.

In a well-ordered society, people know their places. In Jesus' world the "few, very rich and the many, very poor." Knew well their places. That is not to say they agreed or accepted this regime.

But in Jesus re-imagined realm of God those 'places' were reversed.

That's the pastoral bit.

(ii)

The Gospels tough 'good shepherd' - Galilean, peasant sage - appears not to be afraid to push boundaries.

Family boundaries.  
Life boundaries.  
Religious boundaries.  
Empire boundaries.

Perhaps the most dramatic biblical story of boundary-pushing (according to some) is when Jesus took action in the Temple in Jerusalem.

Richard Horsley.

“... in healing withered limbs and casting out demons from possessed Galilean peasants, fishermen, and workers, Jesus was acting as a prophet to help the People regain control over their lives and livelihoods... Whether or not Jesus understood exactly how profitable the Temple services were for the few elite families that controlled them... Many would have realised what he was doing.”

That's the power bit.

When Jesus sees the people, without a shepherd we could slip into that fuzzy image of discovering, a sanitised and sentimentalised Jesus, who cuddles cute lambs. The picture is 'woolly' if you ask me.

Really ... ???

The challenge for us is to see and hear the humanity of Jesus behind the many stories and different images we

are so familiar with but might just be too familiar and comfortable with that we miss the point.

“He had compassion for them”.

To see Jesus pointing to something he calls the realm of God, the kingdom of God ... where there are new possibilities, a re-imagined ‘this’ world, we need to sit up and listen, become uncomfortable because they demand consideration, particularly by the church and especially by the Empire.

To hear Jesus inviting his followers to join with him, to walk without fear beyond the many boundaries which always prohibit, block, or deny access to deeper humanity is a challenge we must enter into. (*Spong 2001:131*)

As I have mentioned many times, Mark tells these stories from memory, reflecting on the past, to meet the needs of the now, to sustain a faithful future.

"It is perhaps ironic that some of Jesus' best-known teachings derive not from the lips of Jesus himself but from the hearts of his followers as they reflected on Jesus' own actions, compassionate actions.

- Jesus did not claim to be the divine/good shepherd; **he simply gave himself to others.**

- Jesus did not contrast himself to the hired hand; **he simply acted differently.**
- Jesus did not talk up his intimacy with God; **he simply lived as one intimate with God.**
- Jesus did not describe his death as bringing life to others; **he simply embraced death as God's will for him at that time."**

In Compassion Jesus was  
Pastoral.

In Compassion Jesus  
Restored dignity.

In Compassion Jesus  
Pushed boundaries

and Jesus invites us to follow him.