

Sermon 03 May 2020 – The Good Shepherd; “I am the Gate”

Today is commonly referred to as Good Shepherd Sunday and it is easy to see why. Our readings are full of images of the shepherd who provides for the needs of all God's people.

Psalms 23 – that well known psalm - tells us that the shepherd provides for all our needs in all circumstances – valleys, death, in the presence of enemies. It also describes the restoration that God the shepherd provides - green pastures, still waters, a rod to protect and a staff to guide, all of which restores the soul. (Working preacher.org – Elizabeth Webb). As one commentator put it, *he restores my soul* means “*he gives me back my life*.” (Working preacher – Nancy Koester) What a wonderful image. What a wonderful way of looking at having our soul's restored – to have our lives given back to us. If we truly believe that God provides for our every need and we want for nothing – as the psalmist states - why then do we constantly seek more?

In 1 Peter the writer tells us that Jesus is our example and shepherd. The one who died so that we may be healed and restored to righteous living – he is “the shepherd and guardian of our souls.”

In the Gospel reading, Jesus says he is the gate/ door that guards the sheep. To understand this image we need to be aware that it was the custom for the shepherd himself to sleep at the entrance of the sheepfold- in other words, the shepherd was, literally, the 'gate'/ 'door'. This understanding provides us with a clear picture of what a good and caring shepherd is and does. This text tells us how a good shepherd knows, calls and protects the sheep and this provides us with images of gathering and inclusion; of a voice that leads sheep to safety and nourishment. Jesus uses these images to let us know that he is the one who protects us and provides for us - he is the one who preserves and restores our lives.

In v 10 Jesus says, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10: 10) Here Jesus tells us why he came. He came that we might have abundant life or life in all its fullness (as another version puts it). When we look at this verse, we see that there are two parts to it. In the first part Jesus refers a “thief” who “comes only to steal and kill and destroy” and in the second part Jesus refers to himself as the one who came so “that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” When we hear the word abundant, we so easily think about material abundance/ prosperity – a life that lacks nothing and overflows with plenty. This what the world teaches – that we need to strive to have all of the

best things that this earthly life has to offer – lots of money, big cars and big houses. And in our South African context it is easy to see why this would be the case. There are many who have little to nothing – many are unemployed, hungry and homeless - and so they seek the material comforts in life. Who wouldn't? And for those who may not have been aware of the full extent of this desperate situation, COVID-19 has certainly brought this lack sharply into focus. We see the stark reality between the “have's” and “have not's”. We are aware, on the one hand, of how material abundance seems to give so much and yet on the other hand how much it actually steals, kills and destroys. This is the warning Jesus gives us in the first part of this verse. In the pursuit of success, wealth and a full life, many find themselves drained of energy, in the midst of ill health and broken relationships. Others may find themselves on the receiving end of greed and exploitation, at the hands of the shepherds/ leaders who do not care for them as God requires. . As a result, many have learned that to place our hope in material abundance and prosperity will not bring life in all its fullness. Even those who seemingly have “everything” will sometimes feel as if there is something missing/lacking. We see that all of us are in need of having our soul's restored – our lives given back to us - so that we too may enjoy life in all its fullness.

Just pause for a minute... and think about your own life. What does an abundant life look like for you? What does a stolen and destroyed life look like for you? What images go through your mind when you read this verse?

Our readings today invite and challenge us to pause and reflect on the things that are life giving and those that are not. Each of us needs to think about this in our own lives but also in our life together as community - as Church. When we look around us, what are the things that draw us closer into relationship with God and one another – the things that enhance our lives and give them meaning, the things that energise us? What are the things that are toxic – the things that steal, kill and destroy our relationships, health, joy and peace - and draw us away from God and one another? As the good Shepherd, Jesus invites us to a full and abundant life here and now as well as in the future.

When we look at the reading from Acts, we get a sense of how we can participate in bringing about a life that ensures none of God's people lack for anything. This text shows us what community life and the role our leaders (shepherds) play ought to look like. In v42, we read that this group of converts/ believers “devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” We see how they come together as a group and live out their faith and ministry in prayer, the breaking

of bread and devoting themselves to one another with generous hearts. They hold all things in common – they share, selling their possessions to care for others so that no one is in need. What they do, what this means is that through this action - this care and love - they break down barriers. Remember they were a mixed group of Jews and Gentiles – and not only do they break down barriers, they respond to the needs of those around them. The image of the Good Shepherd speaks of the kind of love and care that is seen in the life of these believers. The kind of love of care we have seen each of you showing to one another during this time of COVID-19.

Throughout his ministry Jesus responded to needs of others; he broke down barriers; he healed people and as the Good Shepherd and gatekeeper he offers us so much more – he ensures that we enjoy a restored relationship with God now and in all eternity. Jesus not only wants us to have a full life - an abundant life - he in fact provides it. As we think about this, let us consider his invitation for us to listen to his voice in order that we too may have life in all its fullness. So that we too may find rest for our souls. So that we too may have our lives give back to us that we may live it in all its fullness as God intended when he first created us.

As we spend time reflecting on our readings I pray that we may remain close to God who is the source of life. As we reflect on our own lives, I pray that we may hear Jesus call us each by name to a life of generous love and grace devoted to one another.

Amen