

LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY ¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, 30 April 2023

If you have been fortunate enough to visit the Holy Land and, while there, to have seen a shepherd, you will realise how accurate is the description of the “good shepherd” that we have just heard. In Australia, we are used to large flocks of sheep occupying a paddock of considerable size and having minimum direct contact with humans. That is not the middle eastern way. A shepherd has a small flock. He recognises his sheep, and they recognise him. He does not drive them using dogs to keep them under control. He leads them and they follow. I have seen them in action.

Undoubtedly, Jesus is here presenting a model of leadership. The words of Jesus we heard this morning come immediately after the long passage about the healing of the man born blind, which we had as the gospel on the Fourth Sunday in Lent. Indeed, if it were not for the chapter breaks, we would immediately realise that this passage is part of Jesus' concluding comments on that healing and its aftermath. Apart from the actual healing of the man, that narrative is a massive assault on the blindness of the religious leaders of the time. So, when Jesus begins to contrast the good shepherd with the thief, the bandit and the stranger, everyone knows whom he is talking about. The scribes and Pharisees are the guardians of the people, the carers of their souls, yet they plunder their charges like thieves. Sheep are the principal care of the good shepherd, and it is unthinkable that he would exploit them. The point of the words can hardly have been lost on their first hearers.

It comes as a surprise, therefore, when we discover that shepherds had a very poor reputation in the time of Jesus. Indeed, they were in the group generally described as ‘sinners’.² We may not appreciate that the sheep herder owned no land of his own. He took his sheep wherever he could and grazed them on land belonging to others. Thus, shepherds were regarded as pests and thieves. They were of a lower status and amongst the trades truly religious people could not undertake. How deeply insulted the religious leaders must have felt.

As we well know, we are about to have a new rector. It would be inappropriate for me to preach a sermon about Father Christopher's duties and style in advance of his arrival. And I won't do so. Although my starting point was the shepherd, this sermon is about the flock. Without a flock, the shepherd is simply an unemployed rural labourer.

Frankly, I'm not very enamoured of the description of a congregation as a flock. While the analogy of the shepherd may be appropriate for the leader, we lay persons rarely regard ourselves as their sheep. We think of sheep as somewhat stupid creatures, following where they are led, needing to be protected. Whether sheep are as we imagine them to be, which they aren't, is irrelevant, they have that image.³ Personally, I don't imagine myself in that way. I prefer to consider the question as one of leadership in community, which is the title that I have given to this sermon.

¹ Readings: Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:1-10; John 10:1-10

² Kenneth E Bailey, *Poet & Peasant*, (joint volume with *Through Peasant Eyes*), Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1983, p. 147; Joachim Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967, p. 105.

³ [How Smart Are Sheep? Researchers Find Surprising Answers - Countryside \(iamcountryside.com\)](https://www.iamcountryside.com)

If we are to have a new rector, into what kind of community is he coming? We know him well and he certainly knows us, but it pays to think more deeply about the issue.

As it happens, the opening verse of today's first reading tells us about the community of the first Christians:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.⁴

We know that this is a defining statement because, each Easter Day, when we reaffirm our baptismal vows, we are asked this question:

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?
I will, with God's help.

The question has four items: teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers. We would be mistaken, however, if we imagined that everything is to be frozen as it was in the days following the resurrection. As the world changes and as we change, so our adherence to the four characteristics will develop. New days bring new expressions. While this may be obvious in theory, the facts are quite different. The development of the faith, particularly in its teaching, has been an arena of strife and conflict. We know that this is so because we experience that conflict right here in our own diocese. This is why it is important for us to keep an eye on the early days while, at the same time, we strive to understand our faith in a contemporary context.

Apostolic teaching goes along with fellowship or, as the text has it, *κοινωνία*. This refers to social relationships. The following verses in Acts show us something of the depth of those relationships in a new community under constant threat. It brought them so close that they shared their goods in common.

That the breaking of the bread was important can be seen in the Emmaus story, which we heard read last week.⁵ That reading came from Luke's gospel and Luke is also the author of today's first reading. His message is consistent. It is a reference to the sacraments, notably Eucharist and Baptism, acts that convey grace through outward signs. These also have changed and developed over the centuries, with corresponding unities and differences.

The prayers refer to the non-sacramental liturgy of the church, specifically morning and evening prayer. For us, Covid has been a boon, allowing us to develop those daily practices in a way not formerly possible, particularly in a congregation as widely spread as ours. The practice is not dependent on how many people participate each time in our Zoom meetings. The prayers are not principally personal, they are the prayers of the church universal. What matters is that they are continued and available within the community.

As Jaroslav Pelikan says:

The interrelation between these four criteria, and particularly between the first two ... would dominate all subsequent efforts to understand the unity of the church and the divisions within

⁴ Acts 2:42

⁵ Luke 24: 13-35

Christendom, as well as the efforts to obey the imperative of Christ's prayer "that they may all be one" (John 17:21).⁶

Tom Wright emphasises the point in this way:

... imagine a world without this astonishing teaching! Imagine a society where there was no 'common life' built around a shared belief in Jesus! Imagine a world without 'the bread-breaking', or a world without prayer! Life would be bleak indeed—as it often is for many people, not least those who embrace a relentlessly secularist lifestyle, shutting the door on any of these possibilities.⁷

If we sought to ask how we might be such a community, we need look no further than today's epistle reading from 1 Peter:

Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. ...
[For] you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.
Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.⁸

The author of this letter, most probably not the apostle Peter, for it appears to be written after his death, presents us with a contrast. On the one hand, we are beset by a series of negatives: malice, guile, insincerity, envy, and slander. On the other hand, we hold a very high status as a people called to proclaim the acts of God. On the one hand, we are simply ordinary people living a life that is marked by our errors. On the other hand, we are a changed community. Both are true and that is the tension.

I will return to where I began. We are about to have a new shepherd. As a flock, we are intelligent, faithful, wayward, and opinionated. We often go astray and turn each one to our own way.⁹ That's who we are. If our shepherd is to be a good shepherd, we are to be a good community. As Charles Wesley wrote:

Jesus, Lord, we look to thee,
let us in thy name agree:
show thyself the Prince of peace;
bid all strife for ever cease.

Love, like death, hath all destroyed,
Rendered all distinctions void;
Names, and sects, and parties fall:
Thou, O Christ, art all in all.¹⁰

⁶ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts*, (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible), Baker Publishing Group, 2005, p. 60.

⁷ Tom Wright, *Acts for Everyone Part 1: Chapters 1-12*, London, SPCK, 2014, p. 45.

⁸ 1 Peter 2:1, 9-10

⁹ Isaiah 53:6

¹⁰ *New English Hymnal* 481. The text of the final verse in the NEH is:



St Joseph and the Christ Child (1597-1599)

Altar piece, Chapel of San José, Toledo, Spain

This image shows Joseph in the role of shepherd, caring for Jesus, the “Good Shepherd”.

The Christ child wears the red robe of a martyr, giving his life for his sheep.

⁴ Love, all hatreds has destroyed,
Rendered all distinctions void;
Colour, race, and factions fall:
Thou, O Christ, art all in all.

For an account of the history of this hymn, see my forthcoming article in the June/July 2023 issue of the *St James Parish Connections*.