

“...lays down his life for the sheep”

Reflection: 21 April 2024 Rev'd Ian Brown

1 John 3: 16 - 24, John 10: 11 - 18

I was challenged by today's gospel in the context of remembering war and sacrifice. It's ANZAC day this Thursday and there's so much current conflict that we can't ignore what Jesus means to us and to those in suffering in these hard times for so many.

In John chapter 10, Jesus speaks of being like a good shepherd. The story in this gospel is one of contrasts; the good shepherd in comparison with the hired hand, the one who lays down his life for his sheep against the one who runs away when danger comes. It concentrates on Jesus qualities as leader of the flock and us as followers. The Good Shepherd is a caring figure who will risk his life for us, so we should follow him.

All true of course, but then some will take the example and push it to say, we should do likewise and follow Jesus in the giving ourselves for others. Self sacrifice for God and country. For many this is a deeply held truth. It almost sounds ok. Following Jesus is right, except that we follow one who gave himself that we might have abundant life. Not that we might follow in a cult of giving into death, not school for martyrs. In this sense, the doctrine that says the ministry of Jesus Christ was unique is absolutely spot on. Duty and service are important and complex issues, but this isn't the environment they come from. The good shepherd calls to the sheep who know his voice and they follow.

Like me, you will have seen images everyday of conflict and its consequences. Old conflicts remembered and new ones, tired, but still deadly ones. Conflicts in Yemen and Palestine, Ukraine and Sudan and the teeming thousands who flee conflict for their lives and all too often spill into the sea.

Much could be said about this misery, but the task of a reflection, sermon or homily, is to point us from where we are, in the direction of Christ. Where is Jesus in this miserable

situation? Where does Jesus stand on this dreadful issue of deadly human conflict?

And I'd like to invite you to join me in that task this morning.

Imagine with me, if you will, - close your eyes if that helps, imagine that Jesus of Nazareth was “Jesus of Gallipoli” - the same Jesus that blessed the children and the peacemakers, the same Jesus that blessed all those who mourn and grieve. Jesus who was heralded as “prince of peace” and yet also as “man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.” Jesus, the healer, the one who wept for the whole city of Jerusalem.

Imagine this same Jesus in the midst of the carnage of human waste that we remember as the First World War. What role do we imagine Jesus taking? Surely not a General and never as a gunner, but perhaps with another role alongside a donkey? With the wounded, the traumatised, with the left behind? Imagine Jesus in places of conflict today. Jesus of Gaza or of Ukraine, Jesus of Sudan. What role does Jesus offer in places of hurt and conflict and suffering?

Where might this Jesus be found? What might this Jesus be doing, this Good Shepherd of the sheep? Who might Jesus be with and what might he be saying to them,.. there,.. now?

If you can - imagine....

And of course, it is not just imagination - Jesus was there in the midst of the suffering, ... and is there now.

Now lets refocus closer to home, imagine with me that Jesus of Nazareth is now Jesus of Melbourne, Ballarat, Clunes, Sydney and Warragul. The same Jesus who died at the hands of a powerful and wealthy regime and yet prayed from his cross of agony, “Father forgive them” - the same Jesus who challenged established religion when it was out of line with God - who was angry at the misuse of God's house and God's name.

Imagine that this same Jesus whose disciples were so devastated after Good Friday and felt that the core of their world had been shattered

- the same Jesus who came among them and said, "Peace, my peace I give to you."

desperate need across our troubled world today. Amen

Is the Good Shepherd a pacifist? He certainly rebukes Peter for striking the arresting slave in Gethsemane. And we are invited to 'take up the cross and follow him'; the cross of self giving love. It's a huge set of issues, but when we ask where is Jesus in our human troubles? What direction is he going in places of conflict, the letter of 1 John puts it this way:

"We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?"

Then, let's imagine this same Jesus here with us today.....

What might this Jesus be doing and what might he be saying to decision makers and planners today? What is Jesus saying to you, to us now?

In a moment of quiet, if you can, - imagine....
And of course, it's not just imagination - Jesus is here now and speaks through the nudgings of the Spirit, through scripture and through one another;

As the Psalmist eloquently reminds us:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me;
your rod and your staff— they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

May this tenacious, inclusive and deep love of God hold us and enfold us and inspire us to do what we can especially for all who are in such