

## St George's Anglican Church Malvern

### Fourth Sunday of Easter Yr A 11 May 2014

Last year I was on a bus in Charing Cross Road in London. Suddenly my six year old grandson exclaimed, "Oh Granny, there's Foyles! That's the biggest bookshop in the world and what I really, really need is...." He then named a book which – yes, of course - we went to buy him!

When Jesus spoke and said things like 'Very truly, I tell you...' he wasn't trying to sound like the bible. He was trying to get his hearers' attention, the way my grandson did by repeating himself. Jesus was making sure his hearers really took notice and acted upon, lived out of, his teaching.

So, when Jesus says, 'Very truly, I tell you' and starts talking about shepherds to the Pharisees, they would have immediately known Jesus was talking about the people of Israel and their relationship with God, though John tells us they did not actually understand.

The Pharisees would have recalled the imagery of Ezekiel. The prophet criticizes the kings of Israel for being bad shepherds, for failing to care for the weak and vulnerable. Ezekiel makes it plain when he says 'You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with wool... but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.' (Ezek. 34. 3-4)

'I myself will search for them', says God through the prophet and centuries later Jesus says, 'I am the good shepherd.'

Perhaps like me you are not happy with many of the recommendations of the current Government's Audit Commission. When I heard some of the harsh, even punitive measures which will affect the least and most vulnerable people more than anyone, I remembered that the Chair was a man called Tony Shepherd. 'Not the good shepherd' is what went through my mind! Now, I don't doubt he is a good and clever man. My 'beef' is with the slanted brief of the Commission he chaired.

A good shepherd, like a good leader, cares for the 'flock', doesn't fleece them and defends them against those who intend them harm. The brief set the Commission up to be anything but good shepherds.

Of course, governments have to be responsible stewards of what is still the common wealth and may have to make unpopular decisions. But why, I wonder and hope you might too, has this new, harsh, punitive and even cruel spirit arisen in western democracies. It is the same in the UK. I receive an email bulletin about the churches concerns there each week, and they mostly concern harsh government cut backs in welfare. Of course, governments know that churches will do their best to alleviate hardship; I suspect they count on us. Those whose work is to oversee the common life of the whole people of a nation are morphing into those who are

driven not by the common good but by ideological positions at odds with ordinary peoples' day to day living.

Here is a 'for instance': no government can ignore the fact that growing numbers of young people leave school without basic skills while others soar at the end of Year 12; that apprenticeships which are the best, hands on way for many to enter the workforce have been deliberately almost eliminated while 'the market' is now to decide the cost of university degrees for those who can pay; know that for reasons usually beyond the control of governments, some areas have high unemployment because there just are no jobs within practical reach, sing the praises of strong family life and then demand that young people, including disabled young people, move home in search of work. It's crazy; it's inhuman.

They fail to see that humans can't be treated as mere economic units. The leadership of real people with real lives is much more complex than formulas and bottom lines, as important as good accounting is. I can't be the only person who would willingly pay some more income tax to care better for those who need income support, not have a compulsory co-payment at the doctors and house asylum seekers decently in Australia while their genuine right to claim our help to live in safety is sorted.

'Good' is the kind of shepherd Jesus says he is; and he proves to be. There were false shepherds around in Jesus' day, just as there are now. Revolutionaries would arrive in Jerusalem and call for violent uprisings to free Israel from Roman rule. Others, like Herod the puppet ruler, compromised themselves with the Romans to hang onto power.

Jesus proves to be the one good shepherd by his actions. He has entered the sheepfold where we poor human lost sheep are at risk. How often are whole peoples like lambs to the economic or political or even religiously distorted slaughter of those with power? The missing Nigerian school girls are sadly the latest victims of would be thieves of our common humanity.

Yet it is into this world, these realities, that Jesus, shepherd of Israel comes and is treated like a sacrificial lamb, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We humans thought we were freeing ourselves of the one whose goodness reproached us, while all the while he was *freeing us* by opening the gate between God and ourselves, making God's ways possible 'on earth, as it is in heaven'.

Jesus' words about himself as the good shepherd follow his healing of the man born blind. We heard his story in Lent; it's told in John chapter 9 and now we are in John chapter 10. Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees in today's reading, the ones who indignantly asked him in chapter 9 if he thought *they* were blind – which he did! And they weren't having it from Jesus, considering themselves the only ones with insight.

The Commission of Audit, not a representative body, is, they say sticking to its conclusions and that despite real evidence and even in the face of some contrary truths.

So who should we look to as we decide who is right, what should happen, how should we be led? Jesus calls us each by name, never drives us from behind, but always leads and seeks only the common good, searching should any stray or go missing.

A couple of weeks ago I suggested we model ourselves on George our patron saint who spoke truth to power. We should also follow the lead of the good Shepherd – we know he never seeks his own interests at ours or anyone else's expense and we know his voice leads to the only abundance worthy of the redeemed, the risen humanity we share with him.

Jesus called himself 'the gate'. We can't separate our faith and our commitment to a just society and be authentic. We need to have the two in dialogue, and engage in the wider debate about what kind of a society we will make possible here.

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