

Good Shepherd Sunday

Sermon – April, 25, 2021 Easter 4 – Good Shepherd

Today is ‘Good Shepherd Sunday’. I love this Sunday when we think about Jesus, our Good Shepherd who takes care of us.

Jesus says “I am the good shepherd.

The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.” That appears five times in this morning’s short Gospel. That he lays down his life for us is significant.

Here is a little story of one mother’s love. There had been a great forest fire in a certain area. Afterwards, forestry people entered the devastated area. They saw a dead bird at the base of a tree. Its charred wings were still extended. When they moved the dead mother bird away, they discovered babies underneath. The mother had sheltered them from the fire to save them, losing her own life in the process. It is that kind of love that the good Shepherd has for us.

I am not learned in Greek, but I do know this. There are 2 words for ‘good’.

There is the word *agathos* which means ‘morally good’.

There is also ‘*kallos*’ which also means ‘good’, but goodness which is beautiful; goodness which is attractive, which draws us, goodness which springs from a beautiful heart.

It is this beautiful goodness that is in Jesus, the good shepherd.

His goodness springs from a compassionate heart. Jesus’ goodness attracts.

The good shepherd is like a good doctor. When we speak of a good doctor, we are not thinking only of the doctor’s knowledge, and skill as a physician; we are thinking of the sympathy, the kindness and the graciousness which he or she brings and which makes the doctor the friend of all.

In Jesus, the good shepherd, there is the same quality of nobleness. There is in Jesus, the Good Shepherd, an ideal or model of perfection which is attractive.

So on Good Shepherd Sunday, we look closely at the image of our Lord, the Good Shepherd in order to learn.

A few years ago when I was in another parish, we did a Bible Study that was a bit different. It used videos and was called 'The Jesus I Never Knew' with Philip Yancey. We could do it here at St James actually. Philip Yancey realized that despite a lifetime attending Sunday school then Bible college, he had no idea who Jesus was. He determined to use his journalistic talents to approach Jesus. With Philip Yancey, we looked at video clips showing different film portrayals of Jesus.

We saw Jesus in Italian director Bartolini's film 'The Gospel of Mark'. The Jesus in that film seemed angry. He said 'I come not to bring peace, but to bring a sword'. These words are the words of Mark, but some felt these words were said with great hostility.

We also saw a bit of a BBC production called 'Son of Man'. Here was a slightly overweight Jesus. He seemed exasperated when he was asked for a sign of his identity and even told someone to 'Shut-up'! An overweight Jesus who says 'shut-up' was hard for the group to accept.

These clips challenge us to consider that Jesus was fully human, with a body and all the feelings you and I have, including anger and frustration. The films are the result of someone else's imagination, but they make us consider possibilities. Perhaps Jesus did come on strong sometimes ...after all...there were people who hated him so much, they wanted to kill him.

The clip that appealed to our group the most, was from a 1927 silent movie, showing a gentle, smiling Jesus surrounded by

children. The commentator suggested this Jesus was much like Mr. Rogers on TV...the friendly man around the neighbourhood. Despite this... for me and others in the group, this was the portrayal of Jesus we liked the most. There was a great tenderness communicated by this Jesus. A little girl with masses of curly dark hair, sat on his knee, asking him to repair her broken doll. Maybe it is stretching it a bit to imagine Jesus repairing a doll, but there was joy and deep connection between the little girl and Jesus. This joy and deep connection is Jesus, the good Shepherd.

The beautiful 'goodness' of Jesus, the Good Shepherd is that he lays down his life for his sheep. He is not only willing to risk his life, that is, give it if he has to...no...Jesus cares to the point that he will give his life intentionally, purposefully. That is a goodness so profound...we can barely grasp it...that is a goodness we call love.

And so...presented today with the image of the Good Shepherd, we first look at that image of our Lord. Next by looking, we learn from the shepherd.

Evelyn Underhill, a British author, gave an address to Sunday School teachers in 1927. She began by talking about sheep-dogs...here is what she said:

..."Now those sheep-dogs...gave me a much better address on the way in which pastoral work ... should be done than I shall be able to give you. They were helping the shepherd to deal with a lot of very active sheep and lambs, to persuade them into the right pastures, to keep them from rushing down the wrong paths. And how did the successful dog do it? Not by barking, fuss, ostentatious authority, any kind of busy behaviour. The best dog that I saw never barked once; and he spent an astonishing amount of his time sitting perfectly still, looking at the shepherd.

The communion of spirit between them was perfect. They worked as a unit. Neither of them seemed anxious or in a hurry. Neither was committed to a rigid plan; they were always content to wait. That dog was the docile and faithful agent of another mind. He used his whole intelligence and initiative, but always in obedience to his master's directive will; The little mountain sheep he had to deal with were amazingly tiresome, as expert in doubling and twisting and going the wrong way as any naughty little boy. The dog went steadily on with it; and his tail never ceased to wag.

What did that mean? It meant that his relation to the shepherd was the center of his life; and because of that, he enjoyed doing his job with the sheep, he did not bother about the trouble, nor get discouraged with the apparent results. The dog had transcended mere dogginess. His actions were dictated by something ... beyond himself. He was the agent of the shepherd, working for a scheme which was not his own and the whole of which he could not grasp.... But he would not have kept that peculiar and intimate relation unless he had sat down and looked at the shepherd a good deal."

May we learn to have that 'peculiar and intimate' relationship which comes from gazing a great deal at our lord the good and beautiful shepherd.

If the sheep dog can transcend its dogginess, then so may we transcend our human-ness to become agents of the shepherd. May our relationship with Jesus the shepherd, be the center of our lives. Amen