

## SERMON EASTER 4 21 April 2013

Acts 9: 36-43

Ps 23

Revelation 7: 9-17

John 10: 22-30

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May we see and hear you clearly, O God of love and compassion.  
Amen.

Last week we talked about fish – 153 of them to be precise. This week the primary industry theme continues. But this time, we are on land and sheep are our focus. Wool, rather than scales, will occupy our thoughts.

Today's Gospel reading uses the relationship between sheep and their shepherd as an image, a metaphor for the relationship between Jesus and his followers. A good shepherd, in 1<sup>st</sup> century Middle Eastern animal husbandry was one who protected his sheep against attacks by wild animals (bears, lions and the like), who knew the way to good pastures and found safe places for them to sleep. He put the safety of the sheep before his own and went looking for any that had gone astray. The sheep followed the shepherd to safe and verdant pastures. It is a powerful image of care, protection, nurture and dependence. The good shepherd is utterly reliable, completely committed to the flock in his care. The sheep are dependent on the shepherd for their well-being. From this we take the message that Jesus' followers know his voice and follow his way to dwell securely in the knowledge and love of God.

I would hazard a guess that thousands, perhaps even millions, of sermons have been preached on these texts, highlighting our dependence on Jesus to show us the way to true security, the security of dwelling with God. Jesus is both the shepherd and the sheepfold – both the guide and the destination. Indeed, I have preached a number of sermons elaborating on that theme. But not today. Today I would like to take a slightly different tack through this image.

Now, I know that you can push a metaphor too far and no doubt you will tell me later if you think that I have, but I want to look a little more closely at sheep. Sheep require quite a lot of food. Indeed, my resident agricultural economist tells me that your average sheep needs the equivalent of 500g of dry grass a day to survive. If the pasture happens to be green, a rare sight in Australia these days or indeed in Palestine 2000 years ago, the requirement

is roughly 3 kgs per day because of the extra moisture content. A standard-sized 1<sup>st</sup> century flock of 50 to 100 sheep, therefore, would have munched their way through 25-50kgs of dry grass each day. The grazing lands of 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine were not improved and did not yield particularly well. This meant that flocks moved often, and the shepherds needed to know where the good pasture was.

Unlike most other grazing animals, sheep's lips retract in a way which enables them to eat level with the ground. Indeed, industrious sheep have been observed clearing away the soil from around the roots of pasture grass and eating the root system. This may seem trivial but it is a key factor in effective sheep management. Cows, for example, cannot graze a paddock past the point of no return. Sheep can and must be moved on from a grazing area before they do. A good shepherd, whether in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine or 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia, watches carefully to ensure that sheep are moved to new pasture before they do irreparable damage to the pasture they are on.

Sheep can become over-consumers to their own long term detriment. And it can be argued that a number of human cultures have also become over-consumers and that, like the sheep, we will suffer because of it. There are all sorts of obvious issues that we could explore – at an individual level there are the linkages between over-consumption of food and ill-health; at a communal level, there is the concern about the effect of over-consumption on the finite resources of the earth, and the obvious inequities in a world where 80% of the resources are consumed by 20% of the people. There is also the suggested linkage between consumption and climate change. These are all rich topics and worthy of deep conversation but today, I want to talk about over-consumption per se and invite you to reflect for a while on its effect on our spiritual lives.

Clearly we need to consume a whole range of material things in order to sustain our lives. Food, clothing, shelter, transport...the list is quite long once we get under way. There are also categories of goods that, while not actually essential to sustain life, add to our well-being: forms of entertainment, luxury foods and beverages, art. As societies become wealthier in material goods, the possibilities of consumption proliferate. And we are there, we humans, busily accessing all sorts of unnecessary but infinitely beguiling products.

Why? Is this genetic? Can I blame my parents? What is the impulse that is so effectively exploited by advertisers? What drives us to buy a tenth pair of shoes or to collect French clocks or pewter tankards from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries or china egg cups?

Part of it is, of course, just sheer enjoyment: the sensory delight of good food, of beautiful objects, the emotional satisfaction of owning a complete set of something. But there is more to it than that, more than sensory delight and emotional satisfaction.

There is often too a driving need for security, a need to surround ourselves with abundance in order to stave off the fear of scarcity. Put in its simplest form: we are afraid of not having enough and so we acquire more than we need to put a buffer between us and scarcity, poverty, need.

But it is an illusory security. One of the parables in Luke's Gospel underlines the illusion in dramatic terms. The story tells of a farmer who has a barn to store his grain so that he can make it last between harvests. One year he has an exceptional harvest, so great that there is far more than he can fit into the barn. Not knowing what to do with the surplus, he decides to build a second barn. Little does he know, however, that his days are numbered and, far from needing the grain that would be housed in his second barn, he will not even be needing the grain from the first barn. You just don't know what's around the corner and surrounding yourself with an over-abundance of material things probably won't help you very much.

Indeed, it can serve to anaesthetise us. Over-consumption, whether it be of goods or of other things, can distract us from the reality of who we are, from our emotional and spiritual truth. We can be so busy managing our lives, so busy acquiring things, constructing an image, that we can forget to engage with life, to feel the emotions, build relationships. It's a little like people spending all their time when they are travelling taking photos of where they've been and not actually engaging with the places they visit. They get a great photo album afterwards but how much have they actually got out of the trip itself? How much have they attended to their companions along the way?

There are times when this consumption anaesthesia can actually be enormously helpful. As we experience grief at someone's death, for instance, throwing ourselves into an activity, such as work, can be a great solace, a place to lose ourselves for a few blessed hours. But it can only be a short-term anaesthetic, a place to hide for a while as we come to grips with pain and a changed reality. To stay there is to opt out of the rest of life.

Time after time in the Gospels, Jesus addresses the question of the obstacle that wealth can be. It doesn't have to be – money and

goods are simply items, money is a means of exchange and things are things. But wealth so often is an obstacle because of its capacity to distract us from the true stuff of life – loving relationship with God and with each other.

And so, perhaps surprisingly, back to sheep. The image of shepherd and sheep comes before us again as we look at the significance of relationship with God and with each other. Sheep, like humans, are flocking animals. Their social organization is the flock. This means that they need each other and tend to be unhappy if they are kept alone. Hermits are rare in both human and ovine societies. We need to attend to our relationships with each other, and we also need to attend to our relationship with the shepherd.

This is where true security is found. It is not a security of material possessions, nor is it a promise that there will be no pain in our lives. But it is a promise that we are connected to eternity, to the heartbeat of reality, a promise that we are loved and of eternal significance. It is in loving that we participate in the divine. Amen.

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