

Readings: Psalm 23; Acts 4:5-12; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

Text: John 10:11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep".

Theme: *The success of families, communities, and countries is a function of their leaders' willingness to sacrifice their own agendas for the good of others and the common good*

Today is the fourth in the season of Easter. In the first three Sundays, the gospel readings told the story of Jesus' resurrection. But today's gospel reading sees a return to Jesus before he died, when he was giving his farewell speech and teaching the disciples about what he expected of them. And you may, rightly, ask, why the return to the pre-Easter Jesus?

All the readings for today, including the epistle reading from John's first letter and Psalm 23, which we did not get to hear, suggest a change in focus. Jesus has done his job. He has defeated death, the grave and sin, and the focus is now on the disciples and all of us. Specifically, who is the risen Christ to us in the Church? Or, what is the role of the risen Lord in the church? Or, how shall we serve the risen Lord? At the personal level, how does this risen Christ live in each of us?

All the readings for today suggest the key issue is leadership. Jesus is not physically present in the church, like he was with the disciples, and where he was the leader. So who is going to provide that leadership in our communities, and how might that leadership look like?

At the start of the church, the leaders were the disciples, who became the apostles. They returned to the leadership model that Jesus shared with them. That is what Jesus talking about in today's gospel reading, which is a leadership that is modelled after a shepherd.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus is talking about what a good shepherd looks like in practice: he lays down his life for the sheep; he protects his sheep against the attacks from wild animals and thieves; and he knows all his sheep and they all know him. Those with pet animals can relate to this kind of leadership. And we get a glimpse at this kind of leadership in the famous Psalm 23. We often hear this Psalm at funerals, but it is a beautiful tribute to a wonderful life that is lived under the providential care of God.

To the best of my knowledge, this is the only time where a sheep is talking to and about its master. And it so happens that this sheep's master is the none other than the LORD. It's an image that is reflected in Jesus' proclamation in today's gospel reading. And indeed, the Lord is a good shepherd, because he provides everything that this sheep wants. He makes the sheep's bed in green pastures; he gives the sheep waters; he makes the sheep happy and he leads the sheep through the best paths.

The sheep is never afraid of danger because the shepherd never leaves it, and the shepherd is well equipped to protect, lead and provide for the sheep. As a result, the sheep is always at peace. In verse 5, the relationship between the sheep and the shepherd is being elevated: the sheep has become the guest, and the shepherd is preparing a meal for the sheep, complete with the anointing with oil and lots of vino. In verse 6, the sheep has become part of the family; the sheep is now living in the house of the shepherd, which is the house of the Lord.

This is the kind of leadership that God had always expected of Israel's leaders. As a result, the kings of Israel were referred to as shepherds. Unfortunately, the kings of Israel were not always faithful shepherds and God accused them of being poor shepherds who scattered God's sheep. In Zechariah 10, it says exile was the result of a lack in shepherd-like leadership: 'the people wander like sheep; they suffer for lack of a shepherd' (v2). This scenario is played out in the reading from Acts.

The apostles have healed a person who has not walked all his life. For their trouble, they got arrested and are dragged in to the Jewish Council. And they ask the apostle, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” (v7). They did not care whether the people were healed or looked after. All they cared about was their powers and privileges. These leaders were not acting like shepherds as it was expected of them. They only thought about themselves. They are the shepherds that eat the sheep. The kind of leaders that God wants are the ones that would lay down their lives for the people.

The laying down of life is not about giving up the leader’s life, though that could happen. It is more to do with giving up your position, your privileges, your powers, and your resources so others may live, prosper and realise their potentials. It’s about relaxing our regulations and rules so people may grow and experience the life of God; stop controlling people as if they are animals. It is about living out the examples that Jesus showed during his life on earth. It is not good enough to say to a hungry person, may God bless you and I’ll pray for you. You have to give the person food, and help him/her to find ways where she/he does not get hungry every day.

Today is a rare day in the national calendar and the lectionary. The Church’s lectionary readings talk about Christ’s sacrifice for our salvation. But Australia is also celebrating ANZAC, when many young women and men died in wars for country and monarch.

Now, I know we do not all agree about the place of wars in the history of humanity. I personally wish that the first World War, which gave birth to the ANZAC legacy, did not happen, because I firmly believe it altered Samoa’s course for the worst, at least economically.

You see, when the First World War broke out, Samoa had been under German administration for 14 years. Its economy was booming, because Germany sent highly educated men to administer the affairs of Samoa. These men also had the good sense to work with the traditional systems that were in place. But when war broke out, the UK instructed NZ to occupy Samoa, which was not heavily defended. And Samoa would spend the next 50 years under NZ rule; and they did virtually nothing. Unlike Germany who sent well educated and cultured men, NZ sent military men and thugs, who treated Samoans like criminals and experimented with the apartheid system of governance.

When I was a postgraduate student in economics, I ran a model of what Samoa’s economy might have looked like had the First World War not happened. It suggested that Samoa would have had the best economy in the Pacific by now. Yes, better than Australia and NZ. So that is my thing against wars and in particular the war that gave birth to the ANZAC; and also I’d prefer driving a Mercedes Benz to riding on the back of a ‘bird’ that cannot fly.

I am sure you have your own yeses and nos about wars and the ANZAC, but here are a few things that we need to bring into the conversation. First, wars point to our own brokenness. So while we talk peace, we are preparing for wars. We have no department for peace, but only a department of defence that sucks in an enormous amount of all kinds of resources. Our brokenness leads directly to other things that lean to war, like the lack of trust and selfishness that can impair our judgements. Then there is this: people had died! Yes, sons and daughters, aunts and uncles died in wars! Those are real lives, and many are still grieving their loses.

Yes, Christ’s sacrifice cannot be compared to the sacrifice of our sons and daughters who died in wars. But they do have some commonalities: they both gave us life. Christ’s sacrifice gave us eternal life, while our soldiers’ lives that were lost in wars gave us the life that we now enjoy, and we sometime take for granted. Yes, we can celebrate both, and we can thank God for both.

For you and me, ponder how the risen Lord may live in and through us. That is important because we are all leaders of our church family, and a lot is expected of all of us by God. The success of families, communities, and countries is a function of their leaders’ willingness to sacrifice their own agendas for the good of others and the common good. For the glory of God. Amen.