

Sunday 21st April 2024 Easter 4 & Anzac Day - 'The Good Shepherd'

Introduction

Jesus Christ is the good shepherd. For generations, the image of Jesus the good shepherd has comforted children and those in trouble or facing death. As a rabbi with disciples and a following, his example of a good leader has inspired Christians in all walks of life, whether consciously or unconsciously, to act selflessly in caring for others and to protect them courageously. Jesus the good shepherd has a particular resonance for us this week in the approach to Anzac Day.

'The Good Shepherd'

by

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

Introduction

As a little child, my mother taught me a bedtime prayer with which many of you may be familiar. It went like this: 'Jesus, tender, shepherd hear me, bless this little lamb tonight. Through the darkness, be Thou near me, keep me safe 'til morning light.' Then came, what I used to call, 'all the God blesses', the names of the people who were so important to me: Members of my close and extended family. The prayer about my relationship with Jesus, my shepherd, teacher, healer, Lord, stayed the same, but my prayer for others grew with me. Then He asked me, as He does all of us at some time, to lay down life as I knew it, and take it up again, but nothing like those whose lives, deaths, and immortality we shall celebrate on the 25th, Anzac Day. There are so many stories to be told, but here's one.

John 10:11-18 – 'I know my sheep and my sheep know me': Identity

The book 'Miracle on the River Kwai' (1965), written over fifty years ago, told a story of suffering, death, and new life. The author, Ernest Gordon, wrote of a remarkable transformation which took place in a Japanese prisoner of war camp: The transformation of an individual and the camp.

Gordon told of the suffering of the prisoners; suffering at the hands of their guards; suffering of hunger and thirst; suffering of filthy conditions; suffering of disease borne of malnutrition, squalor, and overwork; in a word, oppression.

'Then,' Gordon wrote, 'as conditions steadily worsened, as starvation, exhaustion, and disease took an ever-increasing toll, the atmosphere in which we lived became poisoned by selfishness, hate and fear. We were slipping rapidly down the slope of degradation.'

Individual survival had become the most important goal, and Gordon said that Dostoevski described a condition like theirs in 'The Brothers Karamazov'. But the quote was probably closer to our own, by comparison affluent, condition rather than the POW camp. Dostoevski wrote:

“For he is accustomed to rely on himself alone and to cut himself off from the whole; he has trained himself not to believe in the help of others, in men (sic) and humanity, and only troubles for fear he should lose his money and the privileges he has won for himself.’

The turning point for the man, Gordon, came when desperately ill with polyneuritis as a result of diphtheria. He was taken and nursed to relative health by two fellow prisoners, both of whom were convalescing, and both of whom had to take his care upon themselves in addition to camp duties. One was a Methodist, the other a Roman Catholic. Gordon reflected that although quite different in personality, both had faith in God and in humanity, and saw serving those around them as serving God. Yet it was so much a part of them (it's what you do, what anyone would do, isn't it?) that they had to think about it when Gordon asked why they had taken on the extra task of caring for him. Reason would have said conserve your energy for yourself.

However, the turning point for the camp as a whole, came in the telling and re-telling of the sacrifice made by another prisoner, Angus. His 'mucker' (two soldiers would muck or share everything together) became very ill and to save his life, Angus gave him his food, and spent nights visiting Thai villages. As men died in the camp, it became possible for others to come into possession of objects of some value to trade on the black market. Angus would come back with medicine or duck eggs. The 'mucker' got better. Then Angus collapsed and died from starvation complicated by exhaustion. The self-sacrifice of Angus was discussed, and the story of what he had done spread through the camp. It was contagious. These men had so little that one duck egg might well have saved a life. The officers who received pay, meager but still more than that of the other ranks, began to pool a certain percentage to provide for the sick. The sick couldn't work and therefore had nothing. These POWs had seen for themselves the sharp contrast between the essentially spiritual forces that made for life and those that made for death.

Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth addressing a (2008) Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops, spoke about the importance, the great value, of religion for societies. He said:

'Now I want to ask, why is it that societies cannot exist without co-operation? Why is it that state and market alone cannot sustain a society?

The answer to that is an absolutely, fascinating story, and it begins with Charles Darwin. Darwin hit a problem he could not solve. I understand from Darwin that all life evolves by natural selection, which means, by the way of competition for scarce resources: food, shelter and the like.

'If so, you would expect that all societies would value the most competitive, even the most ruthless individuals. But Darwin noticed that it isn't so. In fact, in every society of which he knew, it was the most altruistic

individuals who were the most valued and admired, not the most competitive. Or, if I can put it in the language of Richard Dawkins: A bundle of selfish genes get together and produce selfless people. That was Darwin's paradox...'

Jews and Christians are people who understand themselves as being in a covenant relationship with the God who is *hesed*, steadfast love. A covenant is a committed relationship between persons, very different from a contract which is a *transaction* ('*you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours*'), reciprocal.

Sacks also said: 'A contract is about interests. A covenant is about identity. It is about you and me coming together to form an 'us'. That is why contracts *benefit*, but covenants *transform*.

When we are baptised, we are marked with the sign of the cross, to show that we are Christ's own forever in a covenant of faith, hope, and love. We shall have the joy of witnessing that life-changing moment at the baptisms next Sunday, and the confirmations will witness to the words of Jesus, our Saviour.

"My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one." (John 10.29).

Let's not forget that this was a highly contentious statement given the religious, political, and multi-cultural context of Jerusalem 2,000 years ago. Jesus made it during a hostile debate with leading Pharisees – 'shepherds' of the people – who were ready to stone him for what they saw as blasphemy. Jesus showed his great courage and would follow through to the end by dying for his followers then and we who are sitting here now.

Conclusion

On 25th April, Australians will celebrate again the courage of those who have fought for us and our freedom, and all those who have served and serve in our defence forces.