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The Good Shepherd (John 10. 11-18)

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“ ‘I am the good shepherd. I lay down my life for the sheep.
... I lay down my life in order to take it up again.’ ”

“ ‘I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.... ...
I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also,
and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.’ ”

In the first instance this is most obviously about Jesus proclaiming himself to be indeed “the good shepherd”, the one who will do anything for his sheep including even laying down his life in order to protect them and give them life. And of course these were no mere words from Jesus for he knew that he would actually be laying down his life for the world.

And he knew that he would do so of his own accord, not because anyone would take his life from him. This was not about his Father, as he called God, sacrificing his Son like Abraham – mistakenly in a sense – thought God was asking him to do with his beloved son, Isaac. This was no allusion to a heartless God desiring a blood sacrifice. “‘I lay down [my life] of my own accord,’” said Jesus.

And he continues: “‘I have received this command from my Father.’” Again, this is not about a cruel father commanding his son to die a violent and agonising death magically to atone for the sins of humankind. This is a Parent overflowing with love for all her creatures, whose greatest, all-encompassing and in a sense only commandments are that we love God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind; and that we love our neighbours as ourselves.

In truth “‘I lay down my life in order to take it up again.’” Ah! Is this Jesus referring just to what he knows will be his own act of ultimate self-emptying and self-giving – a single historical act of sacrificing himself for us – and referring just to his own Resurrection? Or, could it also be Jesus showing the way for us too? “‘I have power to lay [my life] down, and I have power to take it up again.’”

Well, don't we all? Could this also be a call for us to lay down our egocentric, anthropocentric, self-centred lives, in order to take them up again in a new way, the way that is the way of the good shepherd, the way of the true self in God, with God, in us? Could it be that we are here being called not only to lay down our lives but at the same time being called to our own Resurrection, guided, protected, cared for as we are by Jesus our good shepherd? And is our contemplative practice of meditation not a necessary part of our pilgrim's path of letting go of our life as we experience it through our ego, and preparing us to transcend where we've been and to take up our life again in all its fullness?

"I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.... .. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."

Traditionally how this has been interpreted in historical terms, has been that the sheep of 'this fold' referred to the Jews and the "sheep that do not belong to this fold" referred to the Gentiles. In this way it was seen as prefiguring Peter's vision wherein he was instructed not to call profane what God has made clean [Acts 10:15]. You may remember what happened in Caesarea shortly thereafter. Peter was invited to speak to the people who had gathered to hear him. He told them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ – he is Lord of all' [Acts 10:34-36]. And the Holy Spirit was then poured out on all who listened to Peter, Jews and Gentiles alike. All who wished to be, were baptised. [Acts 10:44-48]

Jesus bringing also the "other sheep that do not belong to this fold" and their listening to his voice, has generally been interpreted as meaning that all these other sheep would eventually be evangelised and brought into the one fold – our fold, the Christian fold. Yet we don't hear from Jesus that these 'other' sheep would have to subscribe to particular beliefs or practices. He said simply, "I know my own and my own know me." I don't know whether Jesus ever said anything under his breath but I can just imagine him saying something like... 'Please don't tell me who are mine and who aren't, who's 'in' and who's 'out'!' And after all when we think about it, Jesus' mission was not to found a new religion.

He himself continued to practice as a devout Jew. His mission was simply to proclaim the truth, bringing the world a message of love, hope and peace, a message of salvation through reconciliation and reconnection. He reaffirmed that God is, that God is the Creator and God of all, that God is One. He reaffirmed the message that goes back to Psalm 23 and is repeated numerous times thereafter throughout the Bible in slightly varying but always very similar terms, namely that “the Lord is my shepherd” [Ps 23:1], the good shepherd of all.

“... there will be one flock, one shepherd.” So what might the composition of this “one flock” look like? One thing’s for sure, it is diverse. Unity does not of course mean uniformity, and, judging from every dimension of God’s awesome creation, God loves diversity. So while we may all be of one flock, we are sheltered in many different sheepfolds. Unlike how the Church has traditionally interpreted this, “there will be one flock, one shepherd” does not mean that it is our job as Christians to evangelise all others.

Preaching on this same text at the Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, exactly nine years ago, Richard Rohr told of how the Vatican Mission Office had recently issued a statement acknowledging that “probably Hindus and Buddhists are not going to become Roman Catholic.” Rohr commented wryly, “It just took us 2,000 years to figure that out!” Reflecting then on all the teaching of Jesus that we have recorded for us in the Gospels, Rohr points out: “there’s no talk of Christendom. The talk is much more of yeast, leaven, salt. [Yet] the salt is not the whole meal. ... It just gives it flavour, as [Jesus] says. That’s our job. It’s not to get everybody to be like us. Yeast is not the whole bread. It just gives some Resurrection life. It raises the whole dough but it isn’t the whole bread.” Coming specifically to our text for today, Rohr reflected, “What [Jesus] seems to be saying here is that other people are listening to him, each in their own way. ... He seems to be saying: This is what it means to be the good shepherd, to be an inclusive shepherd who can shepherd all the people ... That’s the goodness.”¹

So back to the question of who is included in God’s flock. It’s pretty obvious that it can’t be just Christian contemplatives or just Christians belonging to certain approved denominations. Is it limited just to Christians? I can’t see how it could be. Does it include

¹ <https://www.myersparkbaptist.org/sermon/two-flocks-one-shepherd/>

people of no faith? For that matter is it limited just to us Johnnies-come-lately to the creation story, us human beings? Might it include our fellow living beings some of whom we share as much as 99% of our DNA with, as is the case with chimpanzees and bonobos? Where do we think that our God who created everything, draws the line of divine caring, mercy and compassion? To whom or what does God limit divine love? Surely the very idea of our God of infinite compassion and limitless love drawing a line between those included and those excluded is an oxymoron?

“So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

Was Jesus not pointing here towards the truth about God’s will for us and for all creation that Paul spelled out in Ephesians 1:9-10? God “has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” God’s desire and purpose are to bring all creation into unity in Christ, the universal, cosmic Christ.

If this is so – and I believe it is – doesn’t it change everything? Doesn’t it change how we understand ourselves as members of Earth’s community of all life? Our relationships with all other members of our human family? Our relationships with all our fellow living beings? Our relationships even with the land, rivers, mountains, forests, flowers and oceans – the Earth herself?

As we stumble on along the track on which Sarah set us off at the beginning of Lent, seeking what we as Christians, as the Church, can contribute to discerning and giving life to a better, more beautiful world than the world as it was when the first COVID wave crashed over us more than a year ago, I leave us simply with this question to ponder further: How do we in this Eastertide rise with Jesus in the role of good shepherds, loving all into whom God breaths the breath of life, loving all that God creates, and co-creating God’s kindom (*sic*) on Earth?

It is surely appropriate to end with the prayer attributed to Abba Macarius, one of the Desert Fathers, a prayer that some of us have been using over the past few weeks:

O Lord, as you know, as you will, have mercy. Amen