

## **EASTER 4**

**21/4/2024**

### **CAVES BEACH**

#### **CALL TO WORSHIP** (Reflecting Psalm 23)

Calm is your gift to us, O God.

You lead us on the right path.

In the valley of the shadow,

you take our hand.

As we sit at table,

you join us and secure us.

You are eternally good to us,

and eternally present with us.

#### **OPENING PRAYER**

God loved the world and gave Jesus for us.

For that gift above all others, we give God thanks.

God loved the world and showed us compassion in Jesus.

God calls us to notice and to share with the needy as Jesus did.

God loved the world and made truth come alive in Jesus.

We have in Jesus a teacher to whom we will listen and from whom we will learn.

God loved the world and we should love one another in Christ.

This is the way the world will know that we are his disciples, if we show love for one another.

No other way! Amen

**HYMN TiS 96** Sing praise to the Lord!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKJP4k4nXD4>

## PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

Loving God, we wonder how we can thank you sufficiently for your love. You draw us close to yourself, affirming our worth, strengthening us in times of trouble, and restoring us when we feel broken and alone. There is never a moment when you are not reaching out to us. You lead us in paths of righteousness, restoring our souls when we wake each morning to a new day. Thank you for being our good shepherd, Thank you for calling us to be a community of faith and hope, where your grace is found and joy experienced. We praise you and we thank you.

And yet, Lord, often we have let you down. We turn to you now, seeking forgiveness for living in a way that dishonours our faith. We remain silent when we could speak your name. There are times when we could have helped someone else, but we have chosen not to. More often than not we have cared only about our own needs. While expecting you to care for us, we ourselves have cared little about you or others.

O God, have mercy upon us, and may we become merciful. As we realise your love for us, may we be loving too. As you grant us forgiveness, help us also to build bridges of reconciliation in your name. Set us free to be the

people you want us to be, and so renew us we pray. In Jesus' name,  
Amen

## **WORDS OF ASSURANCE**

The Psalmist writes, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our sins from us". And St

John writes, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." So be assured, our sins are forgiven.

Thanks be to God. Amen

## **READINGS**

### **\* 1 John 3: 16 – 24**

<sup>16</sup> We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters. <sup>17</sup> How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

<sup>18</sup> Little children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth. <sup>19</sup> And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him <sup>20</sup> whenever our hearts condemn us, for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. <sup>21</sup> Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God, <sup>22</sup> and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

<sup>23</sup> And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. <sup>24</sup> All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

**\* John 10 : 11 – 18**

<sup>11</sup> “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup> The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. <sup>13</sup> The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. <sup>14</sup> I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, <sup>15</sup> just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. <sup>18</sup> No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

**HYMN TiS 10 The Lord's My Shepherd**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s3hNZT6ddJg>

**SERMON**

Once when I returned to Papua New Guinea after I'd been some time away, I recall my return being described as a visit to see how the sheep were faring: the sheep being the people in the congregation that Sunday morning. Not that the people had ever seen a sheep. But that's not the point - these people knew they were under the Lord's care. We are all sheep in that sense.

So, are the Bible readings we've heard this morning about the sheep? Or are they about the Shepherd? Or both? That's something we might think about.....

We hear parts of chapter ten from St John's gospel, year after year, always on this, the Fourth Sunday of Easter. Last year it was the first 10 verses where Jesus said, "The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep." Then follows straight on the passage we heard this morning. Next year we shall have the verses that continue on from where we left off today, and we'll hear again, "My sheep hear my voice, I know them and they follow me." It is a bit like looking through a kaleidoscope - turn it just a little and you will see different patterns. Today's pattern is bang-spunk in the middle of the other two.

One way of approaching today's passage from the gospel, is to understand it as Jesus telling the disciples the Easter story before he has been crucified. If we look at the verses in this way, we know from other passages of scripture, that the disciples are not comprehending that Jesus is going to die. Whereas we of course are hearing about it afterwards and we know that he's died and risen again.

To tell this Easter story, which hasn't happened yet when he tells it, Jesus uses the illustration of shepherds. There is the good shepherd, and there are those who are just hired hands - not really dinky-die shepherds, as they don't own the sheep. It's a bit like in today's wars: there are countrymen who are soldiers, but there are also mercenaries who come from elsewhere and are paid to help.

I want to say a bit more about these ones Jesus calls hired hands. One theologian suggests that the word hireling, or in our translation hired hand, had a derogatory connotation in our Lord's time given the way he used it. As I say, a bit like we would think of mercenaries today. And it is interesting to note that if you look at this section of John's gospel, you'll find

Jesus' repeated criticism of the Jewish religious leaders of his time, who were in his view not the shepherds they ought to have been; that is, they were not the compassionate carers taking proper responsibility for the people they were appointed to look after. You'll remember I think, that the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel, complained about the leaders way back in his time, those 'shepherds of Israel,' their failure to care for the sheep. A shepherd even then, we can see, was a common image, or illustration, used for anyone in power.

So Jesus isn't going to align himself with those shepherds. He differentiates himself. By proclaiming, "I am the good shepherd," rather than just describing himself as a "shepherd," and indeed repeating it five times that a good shepherd "lays down his life for his sheep," by doing that, Jesus is signalling that he wanted no connection whatsoever with the appointed Jewish religious leaders of his day. By utilising the word "good," Jesus puts himself apart, he distinguishes himself from the officially appointed religious shepherds who had failed to measure up.

And this phrase, "lays down his life for his sheep", is very significant too of course. The good shepherd will not leave the sheep vulnerable when the wolf comes around. He won't let the sheep scatter, or worse, be gobbled up! Whereas Jesus says the hired hand will just run away, the good shepherd stays the course. The good shepherd doesn't run, he doesn't run from the wolves, he gets in the muck with the sheep and loves them. It's earthy, dirty - and deadly. The good shepherd, Jesus, God who has become flesh, stays until he is hung, murdered on the cross. He "lays down his life for the sheep".

Note that Jesus faces death by his own will, not because he is compelled to. He says, "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life to take it up again." He faces death by his own will, he does it on his own volition, not in order to appease the Creator's wrath. John as he writes his gospel is not talking here about a sacrificial lamb, an image of atonement, rather John is referring to Jesus being prepared to face danger and death for the sake of his disciples who are his friends. And it is very

clear that death is not defeat. He says, "I lay down my life that I might take it up again." And he repeats that: "I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again". And if you look back in the scriptures, just prior to our passage today he says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." The commission, or command, from his Father was to come offering life. And that he did.

So Jesus dies and takes up his life again, and then through the Spirit, spreads life over all the world. It is in this way that a new chapter opens. He says, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice." These other flocks of sheep point forward to the expansion of the gospel beyond Israel to the Gentiles - to us. And we hear him also say, "So there will be one flock, one shepherd," so we hear now another important theme in John's Gospel: that of unity. To enable unity, people will need to remain committed to the life which the shepherd brings.

Notice too, that there is only one requirement for membership in Jesus' flock, and that is listening to his voice. He says, "I will bring them also, and they will listen to my voice." Think back to both Jesus' baptism, and the transfiguration, where the voice of God is heard: "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him."

There was an essay in the Sydney Morning Herald on Wednesday, written by Sarah Ayoub, an Australian of Lebanese descent. On reading it, I found that her essay spoke directly to that command, or invitation, of "listen to him." She wrote just after the stabbing and riots at the Good Shepherd Church in Wakeley on Monday night. And by the way, how apt the name of the church given today's readings! Miss Ayoub began her essay with the event of Jesus' arrest the night before his death, when one of the disciples cut off the right ear of Malchus, a servant of the high priest. And she then wrote, and I quote: "And even though he was being led away to be tortured and killed, Jesus still healed the man's ear, giving his disciples an arguably obvious lesson: violence begets violence." Her essay went on essentially to comment on the tensions in the community of

Wakeley and nearby areas, and how those tensions had come about. And she ended her thoughts by stating: "Mob justice is not divine justice, and even unto death, Jesus knew that. In healing an ear, perhaps he was inviting us to listen."

Now along with that invitation, indeed that command to listen, we have heard that our Lord makes it abundantly clear that his purpose in becoming one with us through his incarnation was to bring us all together into one with God. John, the son of Zebedee, who, by the time he wrote his Gospel was an old man, also wrote the letter that we heard a part of this morning. Listen again to how the passage we heard from that first letter starts off, "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." We are to listen, and then also to heed. As Jesus had spoken of laying down his life in the interests of his sheep, so his hearers are to lay down their lives for each other - a loving which goes the whole way in the interest of others.

Verse 17 asks, "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?" There is a practical earthiness there. While the focus in John's letter is very much on life within the Christian community, often the statements are just as applicable in a broader sense. We today belong to a world in need with all its complexities, political, social and otherwise. We are all connected. We are not islands unto ourselves. Perhaps we could even put the babe in the manger in the context of today's world. A Palestinian Christian Pastor living in Bethlehem, didn't call his Christmas message this year, "Christ in the Manger," he titled it: "Christ in the Rubble." He said, "Jesus is under the rubble when we rely on power, might and weapons." That is the experience of our brothers and sisters in war-torn countries today. The pastor mentioned the incarnation as being messy and bloody, and staying in solidarity with the poor, the marginalised. That certainly fits the scriptures we have read this morning: the Good Shepherd is in the muck with the sheep.



Sometimes it can be very hard to believe that that is where God is: where all is not bright and beautiful. John in his letter goes on to speak of truth, the commandments and the Spirit. These verses are not easy to grasp, and I'm relying on a good theologian's comments here: the mention of truth in this context, is to do with integrity, and persuading our mind to conscience. We are to live by faith rather than getting bogged down in our own feelings. We are to be confident in God as the source of love and light. We are to be confident and stand on our own two feet in God's love for us and the world he has come to save. John spells out the commandments that matter when he states these two: we need to believe in Jesus Christ and we need to love one another.

Now just a point to note before I close about a few words that John writes there in his letter which are often mis-interpreted: "Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him." (Verses 21 & 22) Take care with that phrase, "we receive from him whatever we ask". Does it really mean that I will get what I want? Be warned, this is not to be transferred to our consumer society! Rather, it is about receiving what we need when we engage in the life of God and doing God's commandments; it is a way of affirming the sufficiency of God and God's love for us all. I hope that you can attest to that as you reflect on your life's journey with Him.

So what do you think about these passages today? Are they about the sheep, or about the Shepherd, or both? - as I put to you right at the beginning. And what is the challenge we are left with then? Perhaps we are being asked two things: (1) are we ourselves listening to the voice of the Good Shepherd that we might live out the abundant life he offers? And (2) are we willing to learn from him how to shepherd others? Surely this is about reaching out to share the blessings we have been given. Why? Because if we listen, we shall hear Jesus inviting us to be instruments of his love. The Lord be with you, Amen.

**HYMN TiS 608** Where cross the crowded ways of life

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jY9O9MPsro0>

## PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING

Every good gift comes from God. Let us pray:

Generous God, we thank you for the opportunity we have to give and to share. May all that we are able to contribute here and in other parts of our lives, become a blessing. With gratefulness we dedicate ourselves to you, and we pray that our gifts brought forward this morning will be used wisely for your glory. In Jesus name we pray. Amen

## PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

We have been including in our prayers each week, a prayer from the Hunter Presbytery for a Uniting congregation, and this week it is our own congregation. So how good is that! I counted the number of groups other than us who will be following this prayer diary, and it came to 36. So I would say that at least a thousand people will be praying just for us during their services this morning! What a blessing! And I'll include the prayer suggested in a prayer for ourselves in a moment too. Also for our prayers today, we need to remember that it has been a sad and difficult week for many in Sydney, and that matters internationally continue to be of major concern.

After my words, "Good Shepherd, in your mercy," your response will be, "hear our prayer". Let us pray:

Loving Shepherd, we pray for your people of every land. We pray for those countries torn by war and conflict, especially Ukraine, Sudan and the countries of the Middle East. We pray for all who suffer atrocities, who live

in fear, who hunger, who mourn loved ones. We pray for those who are imprisoned unjustly and are compelled to stay where their lives are at risk, and we pray too for those who put their lives at risk when they flee. We pray for the many peoples who have no safe place to lay their head. We pray for those whose home is in the rubble, or the dry desert, or the small raft or boat on the sea. We pray for the willingness of leaders to negotiate just and peaceful resolutions. We pray for those who endeavour to provide aid and relief. We pray that we will listen to your voice of compassion.

Good Shepherd, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Loving Shepherd, we pray for your church and for all who follow you. We pray for faith leaders meeting this week in Sydney, that they will be given the wisdom and understanding needed to assure calm and peace across their communities. We pray for healing and acceptance of one another especially among the youth who have grown up knowing only how to react to adversity with violence. We give thanks for our own cohesive community here and pray that we will listen to your voice calling us to be instruments of love. Along with so many praying for us this morning, we pray too, that you would bless our mission outreach and may the Holy Spirit be present in our Church Services and activities. May all we do be to God's glory.

Good Shepherd, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Loving Shepherd, we pray for our government leaders and those in police and medical professions. We give thanks for the wise and measured way they have managed the Bondi tragedy of last weekend. We pray for those who mourn loved ones suddenly taken from them, for those recovering wounds, for all who remain distressed and traumatised. We pray that a concerted effort will be made to improve mental health services across our nation, and that homelessness too will be addressed with urgency and compassion.

Good Shepherd, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Loving Shepherd, we pray now for those we know personally and who you entrust to our care. We pray for our families and friends, for those who depend on others, and for those with constant responsibility of care for others. Help us to support one another, accept and value one another. We pray especially for Mark and also for Jan as they recover from medical issues, and we continue to pray for Marie, for Jack and Myra, Pat, Keith, and for Val. We will pause now for a time of silence, so that you may bring before God, others you may wish to name.....

Comfort and heal we pray all whom we have mentioned by name, and grant to all who are in sorrow, need sickness, or any other trouble - indeed us all, your peace.

Good Shepherd, who lay down your life for your sheep, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Let us now draw our prayer time together by singing the prayer Jesus taught us:

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come,

your will be done,

on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins

as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial

and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours

now and forever. Amen.

**HYMN TIS 217 (i) Love Divine**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPbD2G3i-7Y>

**BENEDICTION**

Christ Jesus who is the Good Shepherd, sends us out to our families, our friends and communities.

We will listen to his voice and heed what he says.

We go under his protection, guided by day, and guarded by night - tended, comforted, and defended.

We will, with the Holy Spirit's guidance, be instruments of God's love.

So now, may the peace and the blessing of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be upon you and remain with you always. Amen

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liH\\_HdkWs74](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liH_HdkWs74)