

The Lord is my Shepherd – Easter 4

Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:1-10; John 10:1-10

I invite you to hold up five fingers and with your index finger of your other hand point to each one starting with the pinkie say with me: *The Lord is my Shepherd.*

That is the outline for the sermon – *The Lord is my Shepherd.*

How much comfort those words have brought to people since David wrote them some 3,000 years ago. Carved on prison walls, hung on hospital walls, spoken by the living, uttered by the dying.

The Lord is my Shepherd.

If you were to select one word out of those five which one would be your favourite?

Shepherd?

Is?

My?

Lord?

Which is your choice?

The Lord is my Shepherd.

LORD

If you were to select the word Lord I can understand why. David really dedicates the whole Psalm to explain the first word of the Psalm. The first word of the Psalm in Hebrew is not an article – it is a proper name – Yahweh. Yahweh he says is my shepherd. It is the name God gave Himself. There is a difference between a name and a title. The name of our Prime Minister is Julia Gillard, the title is Prime Minister. God's titles are many, Creator, King of kings, God Almighty, Holy One, the Provider, the Healer. There are many titles for God.

The main names for God in the OT are:

El Shaddai – usually translated as *God Almighty*;

Adonai – usually translated as *My Lord*;

Elohim which is a plural of *majesty*;

But when Moses asked his question at the burning bush – *who will I say sent me?* God gave one name – *Yahweh*. The word is really a combination of two

Hebrew words – *I am* and *I will be*. *I am* and *I will be*. We don't have a word in English that captures both of those – we'd have to say *Iamwillbe* (say it fast).

When God's name was written it was only with the consonants YHWH as a mark of reverence. And when it was read aloud it was not pronounced *Yahweh* rather *Adonai* was used as a sign of reverence. Later the name Jehovah was artificially constructed from *Yahweh* and *Adonai* out of respect for God's holiness and this was pronounced instead of *Yahweh* after the 3rd century BC.

The Israelites knew the name of God was holy!

Yahweh is translated *Lord* but is a word that in Hebrew is plural with a singular meaning. So *Yahweh* often appears in the phrase *Yahweh of hosts*, probably denoting heavenly or angelic armies. So *Yahweh* is not just *Lord* but is Lord of lords, Lord of hosts, Lord of a whole heavenly court. This is no lonely Lord but a majestic Lord in a kingly setting.

This is the Lord who is our shepherd!

So when the Lord said to Moses tell them *I am will be* sent you, *Yahweh* sent you the Lord is saying that: 'the great I am', 'the one who never changes', 'the one who will never be altered', 'the one who will never be diminished', 'the unchanging force in the universe' sent you. The one who is the 'Lord of hosts' sent you.

This is the Lord who is our shepherd.

If I were to ask you today: How are you? You would say I am ... and you would fill in the blank. I am happy, I am lonely, I am bored, I am sleepy, I am fine, I am excited. But if we ask God how are you? God would say: *I am*. And never finish the sentence because He has never changed. His love has never diminished. His strength has never wavered, His plan has never altered. He has never had a second thought. He's never gotten tired. When we pray we'll never catch Him asleep or in a cranky mood. We can no more exhaust His grace than a sardine could swallow the entire Pacific Ocean. There is as much love in His heart now as there was the moment He placed His Son in the manger or watched His Son on the Cross. It has never diminished. We don't cause His love to ebb and flow. There is never a time when He says 'time out – angels come here and help me because we have so many prayer requests for Japan, or the Middle East'. We don't and can't wear him out.

This is the Lord who is our shepherd.

He never changes.

Lloyd Douglas wrote many books, one of the best known is The Robe. When He was studying he lived in College and on the first floor a retired wheelchair-

bound professor lived. This professor would receive Lloyd Douglas every morning because Douglas would knock on his door and open it up and ask the Professor this question: *tell me the good news for the day*. And the professor had a habit – he would reach and take off the table a tuning fork, and he would hit that tuning fork against the metal part of his wheel chair and he would let it vibrate up against his ear and he would say: *'That, Mr Douglas is middle C. The tenor down the hall sings flat, the piano upstairs is out of tune, but that is middle C. It was middle C yesterday, it is middle C now and it will be middle C tomorrow.'*

We each need a middle C. We need someone in our lives who never changes because everything else does. And that someone is our shepherd. The Lord, Yahweh, is my shepherd.

SHEPHERD

Now if you chose this word shepherd I can understand that too. That's a great word when we think about what a shepherd does. A shepherd takes care of the sheep. Nothing else. It is one sentence job description – provide for and protect the sheep. That is to watch over the sheep and make sure nothing happens to them. He makes finding food easy – prepares a table for them. He looks for lush pasture and the sheep follow him to it. The sheep trust the shepherd to take them to the right places – they follow the shepherd. One thing a shepherd did was to pour oil down the snake holes so those little snakes couldn't get out and if they did he would put oil on the sheep's head so the fragrance of the odour would repulse the snakes. He would anoint their heads with oil; he would prepare their table in the presence of the enemy. He would lead them by still waters because he knew that sheep, if they ended up in rushing water, their wool would get heavy and they would get sucked down the streams. This is how the shepherd cared for his sheep.

When the Psalm says the Lord is my shepherd, it is talking about ultimate care and love. A level of care that will restore souls and later in John 10 we discover a level of love that lays down His life for the sheep.

This shepherd knows our need for holiness in order to be in his company and so he himself guides us to walk in paths of righteousness. He could delegate this – but He Himself guides us. And on the journey the shepherd Himself sustains us – feeding us with the spiritual food of His own Body and His own Blood.

According to the Bible we will one day stand before God and we all fear judgement because deep inside we know we have made mistakes – each and every one of us. When the light of God's holiness falls upon us there will be no place to hide. It will be too late to try again. And the only voice that will matter at that moment will be the voice of the Son of the Father – who at that

moment will speak up on behalf of all those who have aligned themselves with Him and He will put His arm around each of us and say – ‘oh she’s with, oh he’s with Me’. And the Father will say ‘come in’. For Jesus says *I know My sheep and My sheep know Me, just as the Father knows Me and I know the Father* (Jn 10:14).

Our shepherd takes the time to know each of us personally and wants each of us to know Him personally. Not someone else’s shepherd but mine/yours!

IS

Some may have chosen the word is as the best word in the whole sentence. He is. Not that He might be, or could be but he is right now. There are a lot of things in life that we can’t control. We can’t control who our parents are, who our siblings are, the weather, the economy, the looks with which we were born. The great thing in life is that we can control who our shepherd is. And we get to control where we spend eternity – God once and for all tips the scales of justice in our direction when He says: ‘you know I’m not going to let you choose your hair colour or shoe size but I am going to let you choose where you spend eternity.’

That’s the choice we get when we say the Lord is my shepherd.

MY

Then there is the big word in the phrase, my – *my shepherd*. As a church we can also say He is our shepherd. But Jesus needs to be a shepherd individually to each of us before He can be our shepherd collectively. ie we have to speak for oneself first in order to be able to speak together.

We can’t speak this on behalf of anyone else – husband, wife, children, or friend. We each get to choose whether Jesus is our shepherd or not. It is about choosing whether Jesus takes His rightful place in our lives and whether we let Him lead us at all times. But notice how He offers it and lets us take it up or not. Normally sheep don’t choose their shepherd –the master chooses the sheep. And yes, we have first been chosen by the Lord, but then He leaves His hand out for us to put ours in His and take up His offer. The sheep actually get to choose whether to follow or not. But the expectation is then we will walk with Him wherever He leads.

Declaring the Lord is my shepherd is a declaration that Jesus calls the shots in my life from now on. That we let Him direct our paths, whether that be seeking where to live in retirement, in a job direction, in personal relationships, or in the choice of school. We walk with the shepherd wherever He takes us trusting that He will lead us to good places and provide and care for us. Our choice to follow is because of our love of Him. If we follow Jesus

for any other reason other than love it will be hard to stay on the path. We follow out of love.

Another reason we need Jesus as shepherd is because we need someone who knows the way, and indeed is the way, to lead us through the valley of the shadow of death. This may be the best part of the whole Psalm where David says: *'though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil' why? Because you are with me and your rod and staff they comfort me.*

Notice something different here. Up until that phrase David's been talking to you and me about God the Lord – then when he gets to the topic of death he stops talking to you and me and starts talking to God Himself. *'You are with me'* – suddenly you and I are listening as David talks to God. There is a message here – when it comes to the topic of death be quick to talk to God.

One day I was at the hairdressers and as I have been going there for many years we joke about and talk and laugh together. Several are extraverts so it is often a communal conversation that includes anyone sitting in the chairs. This particular time they asked what I did that day. I said that I had taken a funeral – as you do. The whole hairdressing salon went silent. Totally silent. They didn't know what to say. No one wants to talk about death. But all of us are headed in the same direction.

A question: is there anyone here who is younger today than you were yesterday?

David addresses death – and he doesn't say *if I walk* through the valley of the shadow of death. David knows he will - and he says *even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death*. He is not going to get stuck there because the shepherd is going to walk with him and take him through. Jesus echoed the same promise where He told the disciples not to be afraid as there are many mansions, in His Father's House and that "I am going to prepare a place for you", and you and you and when I come back I will take you to be with me so you can be where I am. I will take you. There are many jobs angels do but a job the shepherd claims for Himself is that of escorting you and me through the valley of the shadow of death.

From the perspective of God death is a great thing - since the victory of the Cross.

George Tolac made a name for himself by getting pieces of the Titanic off the ocean floor. He went down in a submarine with a robotic arm and discovered a piece of the Titanic that had separated itself from the wreckage. This made it possible to take a piece back with him. But the problem was that it weighed

several tons and he didn't have the equipment for that. But he had a go anyway. He and his team hooked up cables to it and to the ship and began to pull it out of the depths of the ocean. They got it almost to the surface when one of the cables snapped crashing the whole thing to the ocean floor again. George realised that he wasn't going to be able to take it home and made arrangements to return without it. Being the enthusiast he was, he did one more thing. He took a strip of metal and wrote a message on that and again using the robotic arms of the submarine, he affixed the message to the piece of the hull that has slipped back to the bottom. Do you know what the message said? *'This is mine. I will come back. George Tolac.'*

Some people know what it feels like to be called a piece of junk. They know what it feels like to be discarded by others. But whoever we are, when God looks at us after we have chosen to have Jesus as our shepherd, He sees a message on each of us saying: *'she is mine, he is mine. And I will come back and I will lead them through the valley of the shadow of death.'*

So what is your favourite word?

The Lord, the Almighty, the unchanging One?

Shepherd, the one whose passion is to care for the sheep?

The short word Is?

The personal word My?

My prayer is that you and I will take these words from this well-known Psalm and use them to make a big difference in our lives. That as we repeat them over and over we will know the Lord is our shepherd. Maybe in a few months time your friends or family will see you doing this (fingers) – and they won't know but your Father will – because He appreciates that you call Him Lord.

Let us pray:

Father I stand before you on behalf of this flock of sheep and ask you to search out among us any that really need a reminder that you are their Shepherd and help them and us each to know there is never a time that they are not in your sight, never a time they are not in your love

CHILDREN'S TALK/SERMON FOR HALL

Have the children hold up the scrambles words

The Lord is my Shepherd.

Have everyone help organise the words correctly and place them on rail.

Children to sit at bottom of steps and invite all to participate in this.

Ask them to hold up five fingers and with the index finger of the other hand point to the pinkie first and say for each finger *The Lord is my Shepherd.*

Which is our favourite word from this line of the Psalm?

Shepherd?

Is?

My?

Lord?

LORD

If you chose the word Lord that is a good choice.

In Hebrew it is the word Yahweh – it doesn't have the little word 'The' before it as it is God's name, not a title. If we use a title like Prime Minister it doesn't tell us the person's name, whereas Julia Gillard is the name of the PM.

Moses asked God at the burning bush what His name was by saying *who will I say sent me?* And God said *Yahweh*. Yahweh is a combination of two Hebrew words: *I am* and *I will be*. We don't have a word in English that captures both of these words and we'd have to say *Iamwillbe* (very fast). Can you say that?

God's name Yahweh, The Lord, is usually a plural in a singular form. So in the Bible we see the Lord as the Lord of hosts. Majestic and a king.

This is the Lord who is our shepherd!

Yahweh – I amwill be. If I were to ask you today how are you? You would say, I am happy, I am excited, I am bored (not today I hope). God would say: *I am*. He doesn't add anything because He never changes. His love never gets bigger nor smaller. He's never too busy for us. He is the Lord who never changes. We can rely on Him always.

This is the Lord who is our shepherd.

IS

If any of you chose the little word *Is* as your choice that is a good choice too. He is. God is our shepherd – not might be, or could be.

The Lord is my shepherd. There is no doubt once you ask Jesus to be your shepherd. If you have never done that today is a good day to say to Jesus – please be my shepherd Jesus.

The Lord is my shepherd.

MY

Another little word that is a big word is my. If you chose this word it saying that Jesus is my shepherd - it has a big consequence. When we choose to ask Jesus to be our shepherd it means that He looks after us and helps us. He shows us the best choices to make about friends, about schools, about where to live. We follow Jesus out of love and He will look after us even in the scary places. He will always be there for us.

SHEPHERD

If you chose this word that is a good choice too.

What is a shepherd?

Someone who takes care of the sheep.

To provide for and protect the sheep.

That's what Jesus our shepherd does for us. He looks after us and takes us to the places that are best for us.

Snakes – oil.

Still water v moving water.

One of the things a shepherd does is find the best food for the sheep. Jesus has done that for us by giving us special spiritual food at Holy Communion time – giving us His own Body and His own Blood to feed us.

As a shepherd Jesus knows His sheep personally – knowing each of us by name. John 10:14 says “*I am the good shepherd: I know My sheep and my sheep know Me.*”

The Lord is my Shepherd.

Is He yours?

He patiently waits for each of us to say ‘Yes’ and to remember He is.

So each day as you wake up, or as you are in school, or if someone is nasty to you, put your hand up and hold each finger and say: *The Lord is my Shepherd.*

Let us pray: