

**Easter 4A – Ring out war – Ring in the Shepherd Christ**  
**Acts 2.42-47, Psalm 23, 1 Peter 2.19-25, John 10.1-10**

There are lots of wildly competing claims out there about what Christian faith is supposed to look like in practice, and many different ways to be a Christian community. There are megachurches with their charismatic leaders, and their concert style of worship. There are ritual traditionalists with their smells and bells and fiddly rules about how to fold a corporal. There are small groups that serve in the slums of the poorest cities of the world, Christian religious communities that practice secluded monastic ways of life, and large international mission organisations that focus on development – on food, education, hospitals, and lifting communities out of poverty. There are Christian nationalists who see immigration and non-whiteness as threats to “our Christian way of life.” There are people who feel that only one political party could ever represent the truth of the gospel, some who define morality exclusively in terms of sex and abortion, others who see Christian ethics as also including issues of war, poverty and climate change.

How do we find Christ in all of this? How do we, as people who proclaim the risen Christ, find the words and images to describe what it really means to be saved, to be virtuous, to be an authentic expression of Christian community and the true Church?

Jesus talks about a sheepfold, where the sheep are vulnerable to thieves, bandits and butchers. These false shepherds climb in over the fence without using the gate and their intention is to steal, kill and destroy. Jesus has a touching confidence that a) the sheep will recognise the voice of the good shepherd who does enter by the gate, and b) that the sheep will follow this shepherd and none other – that in fact the sheep will run from the thief because they don't recognise the voice of a stranger.

That is, Jesus expects his disciples to be able to tell the difference between good leadership and bad and between the teachings of Christ and the ramblings of a self-important, self-appointed prophet or priest.

What follows from the ability to discern the voice of the shepherd is that the sheep in the sheepfold will have certain shared characteristics and follow certain paths. They might be sheep of all different colours, stripes and patches, but there is something recognisable and distinctive about the abundant life they share.

Sadly, the history of the Christian church shows that at least some sheep do get fooled by charlatans and grifters who are in the shepherding game for their own ego and success.

But our scriptures give us a lot to go on in discerning the true shape of the gate and learning to recognise the voice of the One who is both gate and shepherd, and also sacrificial lamb.

Our reading from Acts today, our psalm, and also the reading we didn't hear from 1 Peter all give us plenty to go on. The first letter of Peter speaks of enduring unjust suffering for the cause of right, and sets out a picture of Jesus who, "when he was abused... did not return abuse; when he suffered... did not threaten, but... entrusted himself to the one who judges justly." Psalm 23 invites us into trusting in God for our needs – and offers a promise not of trampling enemies underfoot but of having an overflowing cup of healing, feasting and home-coming even while enemies remain looking on. And in our Acts story, we hear how the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in the early church community led to constancy in prayer and worship, and also a generous sharing of everything, possessions held in common and responsiveness to any in need.

From today's readings the abundant life of following the good shepherd can be summed up in these statements:

Receiving, not taking

Enduring, not threatening

Sharing, not competing

Trusting, not striving

And, cutely, the first letters of Receiving, Enduring, Sharing and Trusting together spell “rest.”

I’m clear, of course, that all of those statements need to be qualified, especially the one about enduring suffering, and how that sits alongside fighting for justice and resisting evil which sometimes we are called upon to do. But taken together these are what we would expect to see in a person or community that identified as Christian.

Receiving, not taking  
Enduring, not threatening  
Sharing, not competing  
Trusting, not striving

Given ANZAC day, and everything that’s going on in the world, it’s likely that we have questions of war and peace on our hearts this weekend. I can’t help noticing the enormous gulf between the cast of mind that pursues war on one hand, and the cross of Christ and the witness of the earliest Christians on the other.

War as a way of solving conflict is utterly antithetical to the way of the good shepherd. War reverses that list of “rest-ful” postures I just described. Instead of receiving, war tries to take – it ignores boundaries and the protections of covenants and agreements and simply grabs for what it wants. Instead of enduring, war threatens, lies, seeks revenge, and has no capacity for forgiveness. Instead of sharing, war hoards, it looks out for number one and turns everything into a competition with winners and losers. And instead of trusting – in the slow and gentle work of God, and in the goodness that can arise from our common humanity – war grabs at solutions and strategies, control and power.

In President Trump’s willingness to express all his thoughts on social media rather than hiding his warmongering behind the closed doors of private meetings, we are being given a rare glimpse into a mindset utterly devoid of Christian understanding and spiritual wisdom despite often using “Christian” language.

But before we fall into the trap of assuming these attitudes belong only to him and his supporters, or that he is uniquely deranged, we should recognise that he represents simply a very unfiltered version of the idolatry that holds sway right across our society at this time, including in parts of the church.

The thieves and bandits came in over the fences decades ago. And rather than being fooled by them, it is for those of us who take the name of Christ to keep reminding ourselves what the alternative is meant to look like and checking whether our practice of community reflects that. The shepherd is a lover who lays down his life for the sheep. The abundance of the Christian community is one of trusting generosity, holding things in common rather than fighting to win the game of life.

Tomorrow in the Town Hall I'll be singing in Karl Jenkins' *The Armed Man*. The final movement of this incredible piece draws on Tennyson's poem 'In Memoriam: Ring out, wild bells.' It's a wonderful vision of embracing the future: "ringing out" the old, false ways of life and ringing in the new. I'll close with some fragments from this poem that, to me, represent the echoing song of peace and Easter joy.

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,

Ring out the grief that saps the mind  
For those that here we see no more;  
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,  
And ancient forms of party strife;

Ring out the want, the care, the sin,  
The faithless coldness of the times;

Ring out false pride in place and blood,  
The civic slander and the spite;  
Ring in the love of truth and right,  
Ring in the common love of good.

Ring out old shapes of foul disease;  
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;

Ring in the valiant man and free,  
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;  
Ring out the darkness of the land,  
Ring in the Christ that is to be.

The Rev'd Brenda Rockell  
St John's Royal Oak, 26 April 2026