

4th SUNDAY OF EASTER YEAR C HOMILY 2022
The Good Shepherd & Mothers' Day
Jn 10.27-30 AA 13.14, 34-52 Apoc 7.9,14-17

The Good Shepherd imagery is at the heart of the Christian tradition, with the reminder of the loving bond between the shepherd of Jesus' day with each of his sheep, knowing them as individuals, but all belonging to the one flock entrusted to him. Pope Francis has certainly taken up the image, with that photo of him with a lamb around his neck.

From a faith perspective, Brendan Byrne SJ describes it thus: "*Members of the community listen to the Shepherd's voice. They are aware that he is constantly addressing them (in the Scriptures and the sacramental life of the Church), and they attune their hearing to the sound of his voice and the message it imparts.*"

There is a sense, too, when John's Gospel was being written, that there was division in the Christian community with which he was connected, and his concern to work for unity and inclusion of all is evident in the way he reflects on Jesus' call to living one's faith, working together in community.

One commentator mentions that even in modern times, in Israel, the shepherd has a unique call or whistle, intended to be recognized by his particular flock, which I'd not heard of before. It is said that even when flocks are intermingled, they can be separated easily by their own shepherd's call. I wouldn't be so sure of this in the Australia scene. My maternal grandfather was a wheat and sheep farmer near St Arnaud, in the Wimmera, but I never heard him speak of calling his sheep. I'd suspect more likely he'd have had a blue heeler, or some kind of sheep dog! I went there once with my Mum, and it had become a big Merino conglomerate, owned by the Japanese, so things have changed from the old days!

We are somewhat removed from the sheep and farming scene these days, but the religious imagery remains, as does the terminology, with *pastoral care* being part of our secular language as well. It is seen as an essential part of hospital, nursing home and general care.

I have to say, one of the most positive examples I have seen in recent times, is in Trevi Court, one of our local aged care residences, where Eric has the title of something like 'social co-ordinator', but his approach is very much pastoral. He has a marvellous capacity for interacting the residents. Last year, he chased me up for a Mass during Holy Week, which I couldn't manage at the time, and COVID restrictions have thwarted plans for much of the last 2 years, as with Arcadia. We managed a pre-Christmas Mass, and he led the singing with karaoke carols and an enthusiastic spirit of engagement. He was onto me again for a "*church service next Tuesday, to lift their spirit up*", now lockdown has lifted. So I'll take Eric of Trevi Court as my model for a good shepherd as we reflect on the relevance of shepherding today!

And, to my mind, as we celebrate Mothers' Day, surely we can identify the nurturing, love and care provided by our mothers, from the time we arrive on the planet, as a practical illustration of just what pastoral care is all about. It's easy to take it all for granted as we are growing up, but, when we think about it, we can see that it is no easy task, with no looking back, as I reflect with parents, families and friends when I celebrate Baptism with them.

We know relationships can be complicated, and that things don't always work out as we might hope, but, in general, we'd have to say that mothers are critically important in the way they are always there for us, and in the example they demonstrate by their nurturing presence on our lives, from infancy through childhood to adolescence to adulthood.

From personal experience, I at a time like this, I always think of my own Mum, now gone 19 years, but still very present in my memory and thoughts, with her capacity to balance her life, work, tennis and then golf, with time for her 5 children, her elderly parents living with us from when I was about 5 to 10, then welcoming partners and finally 7 grandchildren. Of course, grandchildren are less complicated, as you can stir them up, give them a good time, and then hand them back, so the responsibilities are different!

Mum also gave me a strong sense of pastoral care, when I was growing up, by the way she looked out for and regularly visited elderly relatives and older parishioners who were shut-in at home. She had a different, but open, relationship with each of us, her 5 children as adults, accommodating our different personalities, partners and interests. Life can be unfair, as I said at her funeral, in 2003, when I was the

one who had false teeth and a walking stick at 50, whilst she had neither, being fit and active, until afflicted with cancer at 79, which she faced with acceptance, determination and faith.

On Friday, we had the funeral of Concetta Costantino at 98, a loving wife of 50 years, coming to Australia at 27, mother of 2, grandmother of 7, great grandmother of 11. The reflections and memories of her long life were a great tribute to one for whom family was everything, but who also pursued her dressmaking, social activities and zest for life, even getting her driving licence at 65! The tears were real, but the sadness of loss tempered by many happy memories. We learn much from such a loving mother, in terms of self-sacrifice, sensitivity to the needs of others, and generosity of spirit.

So, I believe it's good thing to celebrate Mothers' Day well, by stopping to acknowledge them for the love and care they provide. We can sometimes take them for granted.

I conclude with a quote from Pippa, Jac's daughter in Grade 4 here at school. In her card, she used a simple acronym to sum up her lovely Mum: "**Magnificent, Understanding, Marvellous**"! Wishing all Mums and those who provide a mother's care, a Happy Mothers' Day, and thanks for all you do. (And my story for Mothers' Day is "**Little Baa**" by Kim Lewis, who was prompted to write thus: "*Every spring at lambing time, I see ewes looking for lambs. Watching them gave me the story I wanted to tell – one that shows how much a mother loves her child.*")

As we continue to acknowledge Jesus as our Good Shepherd, reminded of our responsibility to be people of pastoral care as his disciples.

john hannon

8th May 2022