

Fourth Sunday of Easter

25.04.2021
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Introduction

In the joyous season of Easter we can read a new message into texts that came from deep in the Galilean ministry of Jesus. With the benefit of the spirit of Easter on us, as well as the promise of pentecost, there is a freshness to these words that assert — despite the foreseen difficulties — a deep and committed love.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

These are not easy words to read. More than a prediction of his death, I read these as a commitment to integrity of vocation, despite the cost. There are so many who are committed to the integrity of vocation despite the demands that this has upon them: family members who provide so much for other family members; neighbours who take on caring responsibilities; medics and anyone working in a healthcare environment; ... the list goes on... They show their loving commitment not because it's always rewarded well, certainly not because it's easy but because there is a sense of vocation to it, and underneath this vocation, there's a profound sense of love.

As we continue the season of Easter, it may be worthwhile to sit before reading this text and think of some of the things you do for love; and from the other pathway too: some of the things that people have done for you because of their deep love for you. Love, while it is not ignorant of the demands it takes on itself, is something that does seek to cast lines of hope into many human conflicts.

Text

John 10:11-18

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 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. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 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. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 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.”

Comment

At the heart of this text is love. It is because of *love* that the good shepherd lays down his life. Where others may depart, the good shepherd stays because of *care*. And there is knowing between the good shepherd and his own — *I know my own and my own know me*.

This is the son of carpenter, a man who certainly attracted fishermen to his following, talking about being a farmer. Metaphors and Mixing. What’s clear is that he was a labourer, and he’s speaking the language of people who are manual workers, speaking the language of the families of people who knew there’s no reward without sweat, long hours, drudgery of work, rhythms that ask much of you in many weathers, and demand. And into this, into this context of manual work, Jesus speaks about love.

This is a demand. And it is a making public of the value of love.

During the first months of the pandemic in 2020, a friend of mine who works as a medic wrote to me. They said they’d been washing their hands with floor cleaner because their supplies of handcleaner were so regularly stolen. My friend said to me that among the team of exhausted medics, their boss had started telling them all that she loved them. These were busy people, exhausted, wondering if they’d manage to stay awake to the end of their shifts, being buoyed up by the demand of their vocation and the warmth and love of their boss. Many of us have been in jobs where it feels like love has been professionalised into *positive regard*. The pandemic has been a reminder — for some, if not for enough — that love is a word needed in public places, in professional places, in political places.

In situations of conflict, it can be easy to feel suffocated of love: suffocated from the love of others, of your love for others, of the creative love you can be inspired by when looking for innovative solutions. Love can cover many wrongs – not by colluding, or being complicit, but by allowing us to go deeper than the pain into a creative approach to interpersonhood that can enhance our justice, dignity, change and system.

At the heart of Jesus’ words here is the depiction of a man who was keen to speak to his friends that it was love that was driving him to say brave things in public; things that would eventually attract the attention of powers that’d then seek to end him. Somehow, too, he had ended up listening to a love that he believed would sustain him through that.

Us too.

Response

In the conflicts you are facing, ask yourself – perhaps with the company and support of a friend – what it would mean to be loving in this conflict.

Love does not mean to be cowardly, to be a door-mat. It does not mean to cover over injustice. It can be loving to bring injustice to the light.

But love is certainly moving away from revenge, or envy, or the desire to humiliate the other. Love seeks no wrong, even if it does seek to address and redress wrong.

There are no quick answers to this. Love is a risk and it inclines itself towards creativity, surprise and newness. For this we need friends. And especially in the gospel of John, it is in friendship, friendship with others, self and God that Jesus' creative impulse finds its hearth.

Prayer

Jesus,

You sought to seek love
in all you did:
your friendships, your critiques
of yourself, your critiques of
abusive power, your critiques of
halfhearted work. It was love
that you followed, and love
that you did.

Help us to remember that there is
no place where love cannot be sought.
And if we find such a place, remind us
that you, too, went there, seeking
for the love that was waiting there
to be found.

Amen.