

Sermon for St. Peter and St. Paul

Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. Caring for others is something that, on the whole, Anglicans are very good at. Individually and together as the church, we support our local food banks, volunteer for various charities, and care for our church family members in need of compassion. I could list many other things. We are good at this.

What we are not so good at, and again this is speaking in general, what we are not so good at is connecting this care to justice – in particular, to justice in God’s kingdom. We give away food and donate money. We provide meals. We give away clothes, and coats, and blankets. We volunteer for many great organizations doing good work for various groups of people and causes. But we don’t attack the root cause. We are continuously supporting without an end in sight because the underlying issues are not being fixed.

These underlying issues are big and we most definitely need God to do the fixing but God also has chosen to work with us to achieve this. Socioeconomic divisions result in systemic poverty and oppression, violence, crime, health issues – both physical and mental, and of course there are the environmental issues too.

Naming these things doesn’t cover all that is broken in our world or how we got to this state. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God points the finger at the rulers – the people in power – the shepherds of Israel as responsible for these issues as faced by the Israelites at that time. We hear:

Woe, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat; you clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatted calves, but you do not feed the

sheep. You have not strengthened the weak; you have not healed the sick; you have not bound up the injured; you have not brought back the strays; you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. (Ez.34:2-4)

This sort of “pad your own pockets”, look out for your own interest sort of behaviour is prolific amongst the shepherds of our day as well. At every level of society, in every realm of society, there are people in power looking out for themselves instead of caring for those looking to them for help. Although we may automatically think of the abuses of power that go on in politics or big business, there are power abuses of all sorts. Wherever there are groups of people, there is a power dynamic. Despite the repeated teachings throughout Scripture that instruct us to topple the usual power structures of society – creating absolute equality – the church contains those who abuse their power. Perhaps your mind immediately goes to those who wear the collar but there are many leaders within a church family – officially and unofficially. From the family dinner table to the board room table and from the school yard to the House of Commons, the temptation is always present for leaders to take advantage of the power they possess. This is not the way things are meant to be in God’s kingdom and God – the one true and steadfast Shepherd, we hear today, is going to deal with those leaders – those other shepherds – who are not living up to their title.

The image of shepherd, especially for Christians since we view Jesus as the Good Shepherd, is primarily viewed in personal terms...Jesus is *my* shepherd. But the image of shepherd is most decidedly not personal. Although shepherds care for each sheep, they are the caretakers and guardians of a *group* of sheep. Everyone

in the group is just as important as any other in the group and the group shares a shepherd. The other important thing to know about the shepherd metaphor, is that it was always first and foremost a political metaphor. This was true of the Hebrew people and of the other societies surrounding them. Arguably the greatest king in Israel's history was David – a shepherd. When the leaders of the tribes of Israel wanted David to be their king instead of Saul, they said to him, “The LORD said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel” (2 Sam.5:2). The rulers of Israel and of the surrounding nations were called shepherds of the people. This concept of a ruler shapes the proper exercise of power. Shepherds are caregivers, fundamentally and foremost concerned with the well-being of others, risking their lives and well-being to ensure the safety and well-being of those in their care.

This is to be the foundational character of the shepherd rulers in God's kingdom but, under the corrupting influence of the lure of the human idea of power – which is based on position, property, and pocketbook – the shepherds let God down and God is coming to the rescue of the sheep neglected by self-absorbed leaders. God will take care of the needs of the sheep, will bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy, God says. “I will feed them with justice.”

Whether you read this passage in the original Hebrew or in English, the last word is “justice”. The fat and the strong – who got that way through greed and corruption – God will feed with justice. As the shepherd of the flock, God is not just going to take care of the needs of the sheep – endlessly binding up wounds

and giving the hungry food with no end in sight. God is going to address the root causes of the injustices.

But did you notice who God is talking about at this point? God is talking to the fat and strong sheep. It's not just the shepherds who will be held accountable. Those self-centred, opportunistic sheep who attach themselves to the greedy, corrupt shepherds – for personal gain, for self-preservation, because of the lure of power, whatever the reason – they too will be held accountable. God's primary concern is to gather the sheep together – to form a community – and within that community, fellow sheep – those who belong to God and live according to God's ways – are not to injure one another. They are not to jockey for advantage, backstab and social climb, and exploit or hoard the resources meant for everyone.

This is, of course, where we come in because we, too, are sheep gathered together under God's care to live as his flock in his kingdom. We are to be Christ for each other and to see Christ in each other but that is not the end of our responsibility. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. Jesus passed along the task of shepherding to Peter and to the rest of his disciples and that means it has been passed to us as well. We are not just sheep. We are also shepherds. As shepherds in God's kingdom, God expects us to notice the fat and the strong sheep – the greedy, corrupt, opportunistic, worldly-power hungry – and feed them justice. Not only that, we promised that we would. We promised. "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" One of your baptismal promises to which you answered, "I will with God's help." Some of you may not remember your baptism and these

promises but this is why the church renews these baptismal promises together at least twice every year.

Will you strive for justice? I will with God's help. Will you not simply continue to put bandaids on society's wounds but also try to cure the brokenness? I will with God's help. End poverty? End homelessness? Eliminate sweat shops in Economic Processing Zones? Stop the environmental crisis? These are huge. Monumental. Strides cannot be made without God and they cannot be made without us – the church, Christ's body on earth. What does addressing the root causes look like in our community? I've been reading a book called "Colossians Remixed" by Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmat and, in it, they address that exact question. I must admit I was a little ashamed of my lack of effort in this area because I thought I was doing pretty good. I can do a whole lot more – with the help of my church family – and together we absolutely can make a difference. So, again, what does addressing the root causes look like in this community? We begin with discussion and discernment, brainstorming together, praying together. There are leaders among you who can take this on.

As Christians continuing to care for the marginalized of society, may we also find ways to address the root causes of the issues and let's let the last word be justice.