

At Eastertime we hear frequent mention of our Lord as the Lamb of God, and the Pascal Lamb.

Earlier than that, on the First and Second Sundays after the Epiphany, when the Baptism of Jesus is the theme, we hear John the Baptist cry: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world." Today the metaphor changes completely, and we are reminded that Jesus referred to Himself as "the Good Shepherd."

The picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is one of the first ideas about Him presented to children. We tend to think of it as a picture so clear and simple that any child can immediately understand it. No doubt it was vivid and clear, not only in our Lord's day, but for hundreds of years after, until paddocks were fenced and flocks could be left to themselves without too much fear of predators.

Yet today there are children who have never seen sheep - it is common for school trips to be made to farms to show the youngsters farm animals, shearing, and so on. It is remarkable to see at a Blessing of the Fleece service, how many people - not just children - cluster round to watch the sheep being shorn! Seems hard to believe for us who live in sheep country. We have to consciously adapt our minds to the situation in our Lord's earthly lifetime, so very different externally from our own.

Not only were the externals familiar to those who heard Jesus speak of the Good Shepherd, but it was an imagery woven into the whole thought and language of the Jewish people then. We have for instance just said in the 23rd Psalm: "The Lord is my Shepherd, therefore shall I lack nothing." Psalm 95 says: "For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand." There is that verse in Isaiah, used by Handel for a lovely solo in his "Messiah": "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young."

The term "shepherd" was also applied to the leaders of the people. Ezekiel chapter 34 has God identifying Himself as the chief shepherd or owner of the flock, and the priests of Israel the under shepherds who have been entrusted with the care of the sheep, but who have neglected their responsibilities: "Ho, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? .... The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and hardness you have ruled 'them, so they were scattered because there was no shepherd. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd."

And Jeremiah had a go at the false shepherds too: "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord .... I will set shepherds over them who *will* care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, says the Lord." (23:1-4) The Old Testament frequently uses the picture of the shepherd and the sheep as an image of care and concern, or to emphasize lack of care and concern.

Jesus took over this picture and made it a parable about Himself. He is the shepherd who goes out to the mountains and the hills, the valleys and the ravines, the cliffs and the crags, to seek and to find the sheep which are lost. He is moved with compassion for the people because they are like sheep without a shepherd. His disciples are His own little flock. When the Shepherd is smitten, the flock is leaderless and scattered. And the picture is at its best in the passage of which today's Gospel reading is part. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, who knows each of His sheep by name; whom the sheep follow; who is for them a door to protection from

danger and the entrance into safety; who unlike the hired man who flees at the first threat of danger, is ready and willing to even give His life for the sheep.

The metaphor passed into the language and thought of the Early Church. It was Jesus' commission to Peter that Peter should feed His lambs and feed His sheep. Peter later wrote about Jesus as the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls. He also wrote that the leaders of the Church must tend the flock of God entrusted to them: "not by constraint, but willingly; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not as domineering over those in their charge, but being examples to the flock." (1 Peter 5:2,3) This last quotation is among the Readings recommended for use at the consecration of a bishop. As you know, the staff of office carried by a bishop is a stylised shepherd's crook to remind him to be a true and faithful shepherd of Christ.

In the Consecration service, the archbishop hands to the new bishop his staff, with the words "Receive this staff as a sign of your pastoral office. Be to the flock of Christ a shepherd and not a wolf. Encourage the faithful, support the weak, heal the sick, bind up the broken, restore the outcast, seek the lost.... Build up the body of Christ, so that when the Chief Shepherd shall appear you may receive the unfading crown of glory." All very reminiscent of the Ezekiel and Peter passages. This quotation has come from the A Prayer Book for Australia, but the form in the earlier Australian Prayer Book is similar. You might find it interesting to look up.

The good shepherd of our Lord's day had to possess certain qualities, which are seen to perfection in the concern and care of Jesus for us, His sheep. The shepherd had to have strength and courage, or he could not carry out his task. He had to have infinite patience with the foolishness of his sheep. Unless he loved his sheep and loved his task, he would not be a satisfactory shepherd. He had to have unwearingly and ceaseless vigilance, or he could not protect the flock. He had to have the spirit of self-sacrifice, which would if necessary, cause him to interpose himself between the flock and danger.

Those who have been entrusted with caring for the flock of Christ as under-shepherds, are also required to have these qualities - not only the bishops, for whom it is spelt out in no uncertain way, but also the other clergy. After all, the term "pastor" which is often applied to the clergy, is from the Latin word for shepherd. Please pray often for the pastors of Christ's flock that they may be given the qualities of a faithful shepherd.

And one last thought: accepting Jesus as our Good Shepherd implies recognizing ourselves as His flock, as His followers. He knows us by name; He calls us to follow Him; He bears with our mistakes and our failures; He heals our wounds and comforts us in our sorrows; He sacrificed His life that we might be kept safe. He is our Good Shepherd, and we are His flock and the sheep of His pasture.

**AMEN**

"Jesus said: I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower..... As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me." (John 15:1 & 4)

As there are 40 days lead-up to Easter - the Season of Lent, so there are 40 days after Easter Day in which we are reminded of many post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, and their impact on the disciples. It seems that those appearances recorded in the Gospels are only some of them - a selection, sufficient and adequate for us to be convinced of the fact of the Resurrection. As St. John wrote at the end of his Gospel: "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written." For instance, we are told that the Risen Lord appeared to Peter and to James - but no details are given of those personal and private interviews. St. Paul mentions in his first Epistle to the Corinthians (15:6) that the Risen Lord appeared to more than 500 brethren at the one time - but again no details are given. So we may be justified in assuming that there were other visitations, culminating on the 40th day with the final farewell - the day we keep as Ascension Day: this year Thursday May 29th, It is a major holy day for us - but it is not a holiday for the general public, unlike Christmas Day, Good Friday, and Easter Day - which is a Sunday anyway.

During Lent we are kept well aware of the purpose and solemnity of that Season'- no flowers in church, extra provision of services, and study sessions. But once we've eaten our hot cross buns and our Easter chocolate novelties there is a tendency to think: "Well, that's Easter for this year - now, what's next?" Whereas we are, or should be, still rejoicing in the good news of Christ's triumph over death and the power of evil.

The first Reading for today gives us another example of the beginning of the reaching out or evangelism of the Early Church in the name of the Risen Saviour. Last Sunday we had the story of the fearless preaching of Peter to the rulers, elders, and scribes, and members of the family of Caiaphas, the High Priest. Today we heard how Philip explained the implications of the death and resurrection of Jesus to the Ethiopian eunuch, and on his believing, baptised him.

And then there was that passage from the first letter of St. John to the Church of his day, and to us, part of his great appeal to followers of Jesus that we exhibit that same love for each other as He had for us. "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we ought also to love one another.... The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God, must love their brothers and sisters also." This too is the outcome of the knowledge of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead: the demonstration of our belief through our lives. Love is the great sign of having passed from the power of worldliness and evil into the Kingdom of God. Jesus conquered death and the power of Satan by laying down His life of His own free will, and taking it up again. By His freely giving up of His earthly life, Jesus gave us the supreme example of love. "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you." (John 15:13,14) If we are to follow Christ, we too must love. But this love is practical, not merely theoretical. "Not in word or speech, but in deed and in truth", said John. We must put love into action, practise it. In this way we can be assured that we are truly God's children.

So we come to the Gospel for today.

In the Old Testament, the nation of Israel was often spoken of as God's vine. When the Psalmist sang, in Psalm 80: "You brought a vine out of Egypt: you drove out the nations and planted it in. You cleared the

ground before it: and it struck root and filled the land", even the least poetic of people would have known it was not a horticultural plant he was on about, but rather, the people of God whom He had brought from oppression to a new home in the Promised Land. Yet often in the Old Testament, Israel is portrayed as a fruitless vine.

Today's Gospel passage is part of a long dissertation by Jesus, recorded by St. John as coming after the Last Supper and before Jesus arrest. In it Jesus was trying to reassure His followers that He must die to overcome the power of evil and come again bringing to mankind the gift of eternal life, life which would be supplied by direct contact with Himself. Drawing on the Old Testament metaphor, Jesus said: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower." The old vine, Israel, has proved fruitless, and now the true vine has been planted. Like all vines, it will have branches, and like all vines it will need attention. God has in His care both the vine itself - Jesus - and also the branches - His followers. The metaphor clearly brings out the relationship between Christ and His followers: their life is to be derived through Him. Just as a hand cannot do its work unless joined to a living body, so a vine branch cannot bear grapes unless it is joined to the vinestock. Nor can men produce the fruits of the Spirit unless they are intimately connected with Jesus.

The metaphor is pushed still further. The vine will always proper cultivation, fertilizing, pruning. So the members of the which is Christ will always live under the judgement of Christ. need vine "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you and it shall be done for you." This has sometimes been taken to mea that God will always unconditionally grant the prayers of those who call upon Him. But what does a disciple ask for, when he is abiding in Christ and Christ's words abide in him? An easy downhill slide through life? To bear fruit as a branch identify with Christ: to share with Him deed, in joy and in grief, in defeat and manner of bearing fruit is to glorify God.

There is also this solemn warning: "He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit He prunes to make it bear more fruit." That is, the useless branch is cut off and destroyed: the promising branch is trimmed and trained so that the end result may be as the vine grower, the Heavenly Father, requires.

We all have flaws and weaknesses which hinder us from doing the will of God, and walking in His paths of righteousness. We should look on the setbacks, griefs, disappointments of life as pruning to bring us to fuller life in God's vineyard.

Although in today's Gospel there is no direct reference to the resurrection of Christ, we are reminded that we are to live our earthly life as branches of the true Vine, filled with the life and strength which flow from the vinestock which is our Risen Saviour, Jesus Christ.

AMEN

## **EASTER 5 or the 6th SUNDAY OF EASTER, Year B**

**Responsibility: Canon Barlow**

**21<sup>st</sup> May, 2006**

I find it quite remarkable to know that God has called us - little, unspectacular, ordinary us - to be His agents and followers and servants. In the face of all the grief and torment and pain in this world, in which we probably play some part in spite of our higher ideals, God loves us and wants us to be His loving and obedient children. All we have to do is to obey His commandments and believe in Jesus Christ His Son. When St. John wrote to the Early Church (as in the Second Reading today) he was also writing to us. God loves US.

Is this just a pious wish that we utter? Or can we - each one of us - believe it in our hearts: God loves ME! Perhaps this is just a nice way of saying that all the good things that happen are sent by God and all the nasty things that happen are sent by Satan! Because, after all, God loves us and Satan wants to take us away from God! Surely not!

The idea that God loves us only came into the world with Jesus. Prior to Jesus' teaching, God was a strict stern Judge - it was Jesus who first called Him "Father", and taught His followers to do likewise. Before I go further, may I remind you that God's character did not change and has not changed - He is still the strict stern Judge. But our understanding of His character has changed - we know now, thanks be to Jesus, that the Judge is kindly and loving and even forgiving - provided... provided we repent and turn back from our self-centred ways and seek His forgiveness and place Him at the centre of our lives.

To say "God loves me" is to make a confession of faith. Like any confession of faith, it derives partly from experience, partly from the experience of others whose lives have borne out the result of such faith, and partly because it is in keeping with other aspects of our knowledge and understanding and experience. Some can declare it robustly because they have recognised God's love active in their own lives and experience. Others may say it more hesitantly, because although it is what they want to know and believe it is still yet a little theoretical and they are to depend upon it. And most of us are a little patchy: full of faith one day when things are O.K.; somewhat down the next because not everything has gone our way. It is not easy to say 'Praise the Lord' when things have gone badly. We may be able to say "Praise the Lord" a little while later, when we see that we have grown some as a result of the low we've been through. But we praise the Lord for the good that can come out of bad - not for bad itself, which is always contrary to the goodness of God. Our salvation came out of the ghastliness of the crucifixion of Christ, but that did not mean that the crucifixion was a gift from God! Rather it was God overcoming the very worst that the world could do - that the forces of evil could do.

"Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends", said Jesus, and He did just that! The love of Jesus, not merely for mankind, but of His Father, led Him to accept His saving mission to mankind. His obedience to the Father led to His death on the cross. "In this is love" wrote St. John, "not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the expiation for our sins."

Even though all down the ages God had been progressively revealing His nature and character to men and women who were sufficiently receptive to His Holy Spirit at work then as now - even so mankind as a whole refused to get the message. The prophets were persecuted; the message again and again was not understood or accepted. So "God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him." (John 3:17)

And the sign of the cross became the sign of the great love of God for even His disobedient, erring children. Is there any wonder that in Baptism the sign of the Cross is traced on the candidate's forehead? Or that when pronouncing the Absolution and the Blessing - GOD'S ABSOLUTION: GOD'S BLESSING - the sign of the Cross is made? Or that many people make the sign of the Cross on themselves at significant time during a service, or in times of spiritual peril? It is the sign and symbol of God's love for us. '

As the Son kept the Father's will and commandments because of the love existing between them, so the Son expects us to keep His will and commandments because of the love we want to exist between Him and ourselves. He said: "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in His love He goes on: "My command is this: love each other as I have loved you." Love of those for whom Christ gave Himself is the response required of us.

The disciples were not selected because they liked and respected each other, or because they were particularly nice people. In fact here and there in the Gospels and other writings we see glimpses of petty jealousy and mistrust. Only because they were friends of Jesus could they then become friends of each other. They were given no choice.

"This is my command." The same applies in any group of Christians today. We are here this morning, not primarily because of any great feeling for each other, but primarily out of our desire to worship God.

This lesson of God's requirement of love for our fellows is not an easy one to learn, and it is well-illustrated, not so much by the actual extract read for the First Reading this morning as by the earlier part of that chapter. Peter, the conservative Jew, had to be convinced by God that he really was expected to preach of the love of God for all men to all men, even non-Jews. And Peter and the others with him were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.

Do we not at times tend to become a little complacent, we who are and feel that because we have obeyed God's summons we do try, by and large, to follow His commandments are the elite, the chosen of God? We dare not rest on that of satisfaction - it is good that we have responded, but it that because we have responded, but it follows because we have responded we must go on faithfully carrying commandment of love - God's love. "This is my command," said Jesus, "Love each other." **AMEN**

**28<sup>th</sup> May, 2006**

Last Thursday - Ascension Day - and today - the Sunday after Ascension Day, we commemorate the culmination of the Great Forty Days following the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. As the Nicene Creed reminds us Sunday by Sunday: "On the third day He rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father."

Probably one of the great stumbling blocks to men and women in their thinking about the Being of God, is this old image of God "up there", "beyond the bright blue sky". It's the same old problem of people judging the Church and its teaching by what they think the Church teaches. In fact they themselves have not progressed from early childish ideas and literal understanding. And of course the Church hasn't helped much by unfortunate wording in hymns, reinforcing that literal belief.

Since the dawn of history, worshippers have associated the divine presence either with the sky, or located it in the sky. The early Hebrews probably thought like that about God, and we find phrases in the psalms suggesting that they did. Lines like: "He that dwelleth in the heavens shall laugh them to scorn". Though by the time such psalms were incorporated in the Hebrew Psalter they were likely to have been understood in a spiritual way. After all, the very first chapter of the Bible, written perhaps in the 6th century B.C demolishes any idea of God living in the sky: "In the beginning God made the heavens and the earth" - the opening words of Holy Scripture. So God certainly existed before there were any heavens at all! He does not belong to the sky: God is not limited either by space or by time.

Even though the idea of God associated with the sky was abandoned as a literal fact as the scientific understanding of mankind grew, nevertheless the symbolism has been retained. Because teachers wanted to depict the authority of God in power; because they wanted to assert His awesomeness, His orderliness, and His complete control over creation, they used the symbolism of height, of God being above all things, and over all things. Height means extra power, as in the case of a tall man swinging an axe, or a bowler in cricket swinging his arm high to bring his power fully behind the ball. Height means extra vision, as in the case of a sailor acting as lookout from the crow's nest. Height involves a sense of awe – think of a high mountain or a towering building, as you look up from ground level

The sky is the place of the source of light. Down in the ground, in a mine, is the place of darkness. The sky suggests orderliness, pattern, and plan - it was through study of the stars and the earth's rotation that scientific understanding of many of the laws of nature came about. So they sang: "O praise the Lord of heaven, praise Him in the height."

We use a similar symbolism when we speak of God revealing Himself, becoming incarnate. We sing: "He came down to earth from heaven." "Love came down at Christmas." And when that period of revelation was completed, we sing "God is gone up on high", and "Hail the day that sees Him rise, to His home above the skies."

Paul, writing to the Ephesian Christians used both metaphors: "In saying 'He ascended', what does it mean but that He had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is He who also ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things." (4:9,10) We know that Paul was deliberately using symbolism, because in an address to the men of Athens, He said: "Yet He is not far from each one of us." (Acts 17:27)

We need the language of symbolism and metaphor when we try to speak about spiritual things, for such things transcend the material and the worldly. It is however a language for the initiated, a medium of expression which has to be learnt. And this is why perhaps some still stumble at the imagery of the Ascension. If we don't bother to learn, to grow and develop in spiritual understanding, we will remain at the level of those who worry about Jesus literally going up into heaven and sitting at the right hand of the Father.

Jesus expected His disciples to learn the great truths, but He never disclosed any more than they were capable of receiving at the time. The Church should teach likewise - and we do to some extent with younger children in Sunday School and then in pre-Confirmation classes - and in occasional sermons like this. But most adults expect to come straight into the worship of the Church and to understand all the imagery and background of the Christian religion - and I suppose the rest of us take it for granted that they will.

Certainly, people can come straight in and worship: worship does not need the preparation of a course of theological study. It **does** require, however, a basic awareness of the love of God for mankind and a readiness to receive forgiveness, and an openness to the Holy Spirit. We all - newly converted or long- time worshippers - we all must be continually growing in understanding of matters pertaining to the wonder of God. We certainly do not grow if we stay away from worship Sunday by Sunday, and say to ourselves "I know enough; I'm as good as those who go to Church all the time. That simply expresses the most basic of all ignorances: the confusion of knowledge and behaviour with worship

The disciples were first called simply to be our Lord's companions and to learn by watching and listening. But then they had to face the test question at Caesarea Philippi: "Who do people say that I am?" "Who do **you** say that I am?" Then assured of His messiahship, they could go on and learn deeper things about its meaning. They were first sent out in pairs as a sort of trial run of evangelism - learning to make contact with people and to prepare the way for the Master.

Next came the third stage, of the Passion and death of Jesus, with all its demands upon their faith and its exposure of their own need. Easter began a period of companionship with Jesus far deeper than anything they'd experienced before. Very likely, the Risen Jesus was able to give them theological teaching which the experiences of Easter had prepared them for. It was a time when He came to them only intermittently, as if getting them ready for doing without His visible presence entirely.

Then came the final parting. Right up until then, the disciples were thinking in terms of the restoration of the physical, messianic kingdom. But Jesus was teaching them about their next stage of development and learning, when the Holy Spirit would manifest Himself to them. In the strength and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they would go out to witness to Christ throughout the world.

And on that note, He left them.

We may be at any one of those levels in our own spiritual growth. The first stage of uncommitted Christianity is an easy one. We can enjoy being in the group, the companionship, the niceness. The next stage involves the big question: "Who is the Christ?" and the acceptance of Him as Lord and Saviour. We too will have times of testing and Calvary. Unpopularity, perhaps ridicule; hostility, failure. All come to test our faith and loyalty. If by the grace of God, we survive, then we can come to be part of the Church of the Resurrection - living with the presence of the Risen Lord, learning the deep truths of the Gospel about life and death, time and eternity. Then we walk by faith, and not merely by sight. Then we are ready to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and to bring forth in our lives the fruits of the Spirit active within us.

The real question of the Ascension is not where Jesus went to, or about the way it took place, but about our acceptance of it. We have to ask ourselves what stage have we reached, and perhaps stuck at, in what should be an ongoing, spiritual development as Christians.

We are called to give time and acknowledgement to that spiritual Reality that towers high up over all that is low, flat, and worldly. We are called to worship the King, all glorious above. To gratefully sing His power and His love: our Shield and Defender, the Ancient of days: pavilioned in splendour and girded with praise.

**AMEN**