

## YEAR B: 4<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER 2018 ARMIDALE GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY

This past week many of us have been disturbed by news of the poor treatment and death of thousands of sheep being exported by ship to the Middle East. The people who were supposed to care for these sheep on board are company owners and paid workers, “hired hands” to use Jesus’ words from today’s Gospel. Their concern seems to be for their paycheck and their profits, not for the sheep. Amongst the outrage, it seems to me that the most genuinely heartbroken by this terrible treatment are the Australian farmers.

I’ve spent a lot of time on sheep farms, and from what I’ve seen Aussie farmers take good care of their sheep. Sure, each sheep is a financial investment for the farmer, but because the sheep are *his* he is also invested in them. He spends hours working with the sheep in the heat of summer and in the wind and rain of winter. He gets to *know* his sheep. I’ve often seen farmers go beyond the call of duty to reunite a stray sheep with the rest of the flock; to save a sheep from rising creekwaters; or to find an injured or flyblown sheep lying hidden somewhere at the back of the property.

Last Sunday I visited the family farm near Wagga Wagga. I spent the afternoon helping my brothers feed the sheep which are now lambing during this terrible dry spell and we had to hunt away the wedgetail eagles which hover close to the flock to pick off the weaker lambs. The sight of dead sheep and lambs in the paddocks was clearly devastating to my brothers, as it is for all farmers. The good shepherd knows his sheep and is concerned for them, precisely because they are his. They belong to him.



But I have not yet met a farmer who is prepared to lay down his *life* for his sheep. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep and who lays down his life for them. We are those sheep; we belong to Jesus; we are his; he loves us; he is concerned for each one of us; he laid down his life for each one of us of his own free will. I’m reminded of a child’s hymn I learnt and enjoyed singing many years ago: “Jesus is the shepherd and we are his sheep, and his banner over me is love.”

Is it any wonder that the most popular and common image of Jesus Christ among the Christians in the early centuries was the Good Shepherd. We find it in mosaics, on buildings, in sculptures, on gravestones, and in the catacombs. The image of Jesus carrying a lamb spoke powerfully to them of two things: The tenderness of God who cares about the wounds and the well-being of every single one

of us; and the immensity of God's love for us expressed in Jesus who willingly lays down his life for each of us so that each of us might rise to new life and live eternally in him.

Every year on the Fourth Sunday of Easter the Gospel at Mass presents us with Jesus the Good Shepherd, and so the Church calls today "Good Shepherd Sunday." It's a day that the Church asks us to think about our modern day shepherds in the priesthood; to pray for our priests; and to pray for vocations to the priesthood. Personally, it's a day that reminds me of why I became a priest and what type of priest I should be and want to be.

When I sensed God's call to be a priest in my early twenties I didn't want to be a priest; I had other plans. I wanted to be a school teacher, a husband, and a Dad. But after some back and forth with God, what I call my wrestling with Him, I was eventually prepared to put my plans aside and accept his plans for me. It was the best decision I have ever made in my life. Sure, it has brought me many challenges and struggles, but oh so much joy and fulfillment too.

In putting aside my own will, you could say I decided to lay down my life of my own free will. The Good Lord accepted my offering and seven years later at my ordination I lay prostrate on the Cathedral floor as a sign that I did indeed lay down my life for God and for his People the Church. And rising from the floor I was conscious that I was now taking up a new life and mission that the Good Shepherd had entrusted to me: to be a Good Shepherd like Him.

So today I ask myself two questions: Do I embody and reflect God's tenderness for each of you in the way I treat your wounds and care for your well-being? And am I still prepared to lay aside my own plans and desires, my own life, each day so that you might have eternal life in Jesus Christ. This is the type of priest you want. This is the type of priest I know I should be. This is the type of priest I want to be. And it is the type of priest I cannot be unless I have the grace of God and your prayers and support. For I, and every priest called to this great and fulfilling vocation remain weak and sinful human beings.

Please pray for your priests today and every day. There are many additional challenges these days for all of us, but particularly for priests, given the revelations of the Royal Commission, the growth in secularism and atheism, and the increasing antagonism and ridicule of all things Christian, Catholic, and priestly. Please pray for your priests!

And please pray for your priests of tomorrow. There are good men in Australia and in our Diocese whom God is calling to be priests, but if they are like I was, they feel unworthy and are afraid of what they are called to lay aside. And there are good men in countries overseas where priests are treated like kings, they see our need for priests in Australia, and are called to lay so much aside to come here. Your simple prayers might be just what's needed for one of these men to respond to God's call to lay down their life for Him and for you his flock.

