

**Sunday 1 July, 2018**

*A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe,  
at the Cathedral Patronal Festival of St Peter and Paul*

**Readings:** Ezekiel 34 : 11-16, Psalm 87, 2 Timothy 4 : 1-8, John 21 : 15-20

I spent my final years of school overlooking a livestock farm facing the South Wales coast. Rolling green paddocks extended to a steep cliff face, at the foot of which the Atlantic Ocean brought gusts of cold wind and gushes of heavy rain in autumn and winter, just as in summer it blew away any clouds to reveal azure skies. The farm was run by my school and, in the same way in which I chose to serve as a crewmember of the local lifeboat station, some of my friends chose to spend their time working on the farm. And just as it was 'all hands on deck' for the school community when the school-run emergency services received a call out, so it was all hands on deck during lambing season.

From the end of February till the end of March students were rostered round the clock to help bring to birth hundreds of lambs. I don't know whether you have had the opportunity to be present at lambing: it's not quite the same as attending a birth in hospital. There are multiple lambs being born at any given time; ewes need to be tended, washed and wiped down. Lambs often need to be helped to take their first breaths or be bottle fed, be helped to their first steps on shaky feet. And that's before they are marked and let loose in the paddock. The weaker ones are kept behind in the relative warmth of the lambing shed, with the concerned mum staying close by. It's messy and noisy; and goes on twenty-four seven for four to six weeks. The work of a shepherd in the lambing shed is back-breaking and exhausting.

If the work of a shepherd in the lambing shed is exhausting, the work of a shepherd in the paddock is equally hard: sheep are wilful animals and have a great propensity for going their own way. Our first lesson from the prophecy of Ezekiel speaks of the need to seek out 'scattered sheep'. Ezekiel paints a picture of a dark and blustery day, on which all the sheep were scattered: it's as if a thunderstorm came and the sheep ran off. Scattered across the countryside, the herds are broken up, small packs of sheep, even single sheep wandering along on their own. Vulnerable to the weather, to predators or simply their own wilfulness. Yet God, Ezekiel tells us, does not leave the sheep to wander. He seeks out all who have run off in a blind panic. He looks for them all across the world, finds them in all nations, and brings them back to his paddock.

God will look out for the weak and, to strengthen them, will feed them with justice, Ezekiel tells us. God seeks the welfare and justice of all who are lost. And in order to ensure that his flock is safe, he goes to tremendous effort: he personally sets out to bring home all who have been affected by the terrors of the world around them – 'the day of clouds and thick darkness' in Ezekiel's picture. God wants his people to flourish, today's readings tell us. And he does so, both by giving them a place where people may find shelter, peace and justice, and by calling women and men to tend his sheep, to help him shepherd the people under his care.

In our gospel reading from the final chapter of John's gospel, we see Jesus commission his disciple Peter to feed his flock and tend his sheep. Peter might not be the immediate choice for a shepherd: he had never been a particularly patient man, was quite impulsive and, at the crucial moment, under immense scrutiny at the fringes of Jesus' trial, his loyalty to his friend had dramatically faltered. Yes, Peter was the first to know and confess Jesus as Son of God and Messiah and was the first to see the empty tomb; but he was also the one who, following the resurrection, persuaded the other disciples to try their hand at fishing for a living again, rather than persist at finishing the harder business of fishing for people.

Jesus talks with Peter round a barbeque on the shore of Lake Galilee. He had taken some of the immense number of fish Peter and the other ten disciples had just caught and made breakfast for them. And after they had shared their meal, Jesus and Peter had the first opportunity to talk since his spectacular denial in the courtyard of the High Priests' residence. Jesus calls Peter by his given name: 'Simon, son of John'. In the first chapter of John's story, Jesus had called Simon the 'rock' on which he would build his church; the place where his people would be saved. That rock had proved to be remarkably shaky. Now Jesus calls him by his given name: 'Simon, son of John,' and asks 'do you love me more than these?'

Do you love me more than the nets and boats and the pile of 153 fish that you assembled for yourself, Jesus asks? Do you love me more than the business that will keep you in loaves and fishes? Do you love me more than your career? And Simon answers, 'yes, Lord, you know that I love you'. And is told that he is to be a shepherd, and not a fisherman: 'feed by lambs'.

Feeding lambs is delicate business and requires a fair amount of patience. Even with patience and delicacy, hand-feeding weak lambs doesn't fully ensure their survival: weak newborn lambs may still die in spite of the best efforts. Peter here is told to learn to be patient: to learn not the leadership skills that clearly had enabled him to persuade the remaining ten disciples to start up a fishery business again, but rather to learn new skills: sitting with the weak, tending them, guiding them and nurturing them.

Again, Jesus asks Simon, 'do you love me?' Once more Simon affirms that he loves Jesus. And Jesus commissions him to tend his sheep. A third time Jesus asks. Three times Simon is asked to commit to the new ministry that Jesus has chosen for him, as many times as he had denied being a follower of Jesus Christ standing by that other charcoal fire. And just as then, so now Simon also feels the pain. 'Peter felt hurt', John tells us. Where then he wept, now he was grieved: 'Lord, you know everything: you know that I love you', he tells Jesus. And Jesus charges him to feed not only the weak, nor merely to tend the flock, but to feed all sheep. Three times Simon re-affirms his love for Jesus, and each time he is charged to take on another unfamiliar task.

Simon knew how to fish for people: he had been a fisherman all his life. But Simon had no idea of what it took to be a shepherd, let alone to look after the flock of Christ, the Good Shepherd. Which is why Jesus tells that the Good Shepherd may be called to give his life for the sheep: 'you will stretch out your hand, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go'. You will be taken, too. You, too, will give your life, so that the flock may live in safety. And in that knowledge, Jesus calls Peter into discipleship once more: 'follow me', he tells him. And in this commissioning of the fisherman, who confessed that he loved Jesus more than anything or anyone else – more than these nets and fish and boats, more than these friends and family, more than the career and calling of a leader – Simon is given new skills for a new calling.

In his second epistle to Timothy, our patron saint, Paul, speaks about those skills. He charges his own disciple to 'proclaim the message', encourages Timothy, a freshly commissioned shepherd in the early church, to 'be persistent, whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching'. Being a shepherd means having patience, means feeding the flock with nourishing food. For Paul, that food is the message of the resurrection, the word of lives transformed through the renewed life of Jesus Christ. That word is food for God's people at all times – whatever the season. Above all, therefore, Paul charges Timothy to nurture God's people: 'be an encourager, and be patient'.

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The fold that God built to provide a place of safety for the persecuted and distressed sheep is the church. Like Peter, the rock who crumbled under the pressure of interrogation and readily abandoned his first commission as a follower and ambassador of Jesus, we, the church, also have often failed spectacularly in being a safe sheep fold. In particular, we have failed in our duty of care to the most vulnerable in our church community. We failed children and young people by being too concerned with our own business, with our own status, self-importance and reputation. Jesus had warned his disciples that among the shepherds there might well be thieves. Those thieves, he told them then, 'come only to steal and kill and destroy'. His shepherds, on the other hand, were to be like him: life-giving and life-transforming. 'I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly', he told his friends then.

In safeguarding our own reputation and self-worth, rather than those entrusted to our care, we have failed as a church, and our trust-base as a place of safety and care has been eroded. In this 'unfavourable time', as our patron saint termed it, we are called to heed the lesson that following Jesus will mean learning new ways entirely. Like Peter, who suddenly had to learn the task of being a shepherd, who had to learn patience and care, where once he had been impulsive and fast, we too will need to learn new ways of caring. In the same way in which, like Peter, we also need to recommit ourselves to loving Jesus more than 'these': Peter's newly-bought nets and boats, and the large pile of fish he had just caught. We also need to forgo the business of loving 'these' more than Jesus: our own status, sense of importance, and resources. Turn from loving 'these' more than loving 'those': the people whom Jesus has entrusted to us.

For Peter that recommitment required more than the one attempt at saying sorry. For us, too, our recommitment to love Jesus (and, in his name to love these little ones more) will require us to say sorry more than once. Last Advent, I spoke of the Cathedral's profound appreciation of the work of the Royal Commission. I paid tribute to the survivors of abuse: the sheep that, in the image of Ezekiel, have been injured and need to be bound up, healed, and fed with justice. I apologised then for the ways in which we have failed to safeguard our sheep-fold, and asked for forgiveness for the times when the church opened the door for predators, who preyed on and destroyed lives.

As a church we have failed to be good, responsible shepherds, people who will keep God's flock safe. We admitted people to the fold who (as Paul wrote to Timothy only a few verses before today's second reading) were 'lovers of money ... arrogant, abusive ... unholy ... holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power' (2 Timothy 3.3-5). Which is why we are checking very carefully who would like to join us as fellow shepherds. Here at St Paul's that has been an important undertaking in the past few years. All of our staff, and those of you who are among our 270+ volunteers have been asked to complete training, to provide clearances and Working With Children's Checks, and to sign a

strict code of conduct that speaks of our commitment to be good shepherds. People who together build and maintain a place of safety and nurture here at St Paul's.

I am delighted that, throughout the last year, we have, together with our Chancellor Michael Shand, Cathedral leaders and staff from St Hilary's Kew, helped shape that Code of Conduct for all Anglican parishes in Melbourne. That process took the kind of persistence that Paul spoke of to his shepherd in training, Timothy: learning from survivors and experts, in order to encourage and teach colleagues with patience. We believe that the adoption of our Code of Conduct will ensure that children and vulnerable people not only are kept safe in our churches, but that we, as churches, are also seen to be keeping a watchful eye over those whom we commission to minister. For me, our Code of Conduct is a formal expression of our seriousness, a second commitment of our loving Christ and those he entrusts to us, 'more than these', more than anything else.

There is a third commitment, a third apology, that is still needed. And like Peter's, this apology will also cause us pain. Financial pain in this case. We need to put our commitment to loving Jesus and his people more than anything else, above our financial security. We do so, when we offer restitution to those the church has harmed, through abuse or neglect of its members. The Anglican Church has recently joined the National Redress Scheme which comes into effect today, and that is an important step in the right direction. Yes, it will hurt the church's finances to demonstrate that our love for Christ's people, and our commitment to be shepherds who care, listen and nurture, is greater than our love of material security. But only when we begin feeding the injured with justice, and close the gate to the sheepfold to those who destroy and harm, will we truly be enabled to be a church that follows the call of its Lord: to be a place of safety and shelter, where his lambs may be fed, sheep tended, and his flock nurtured.

Restitution, learning and retraining, are only the first steps on our long journey of repentance. Remember that for Peter to be invited to follow and become a pastor meant both leaving behind material security; breaking with well-honed practises and learning new behaviour; as well as profound contrition: the bitter tears at his moment of failure. We, too, need both to learn the bitter lessons of past abuse; mend our ways by learning new ways of being a place of safety; as well as say sorry. This is why on the evening of 21 October, a day before the Prime Minister's National Apology, we will be holding a service of contrition and sorrow at St Paul's, at which our bishops and I, and, I hope, many other, will publicly reaffirm our apologies and seek forgiveness. We will have an opportunity, as a Cathedral family, publicly to commit ourselves to be the people who love Jesus and his flock 'more than these'; love people more than status, financial security and influence.

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When I was on lambing watch at school 25 years ago, it was messy business tending the flock, watching over weak newborn lambs, sometimes through the whole night. But it was infinitely rewarding, too, to wipe the faces of newborn lambs so that they could take their first breaths; to sit and hold and bottle-feed the weak; to watch the strong take their first tentative leaps around the paddock; to share with many others in caring and tending that growing flock of sheep.

It's a similar privilege to serve as Dean here at St Paul's with my colleagues in ministry, music and administration. To see our own flock grow, and to share with you in tending and watching, feeding and encouraging, rebuking and convincing. To share with you in binding up and strengthen, and feeding one

another with justice and the Word of God. To share with you in turning away from things, and goods, to the greatest good: turn with you from loving 'these things' more than Jesus, to loving Jesus and those whom he gives us, more.

And now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.