

## Sermon for Easter 4B

The text: John 10:11-18

When people are employed in a retail position, such as a checkout operator or shop assistant, their training for the job includes health and safety policies, procedures and practices the company has put in place. One of these procedures is what to do if someone tries to rob the store. Usually, people who are working in retail positions are instructed that if they are ever to be held up, they are not to argue with the person robbing the store, but they are to open the cash register and hand over the money.

There is a very simple reason why retail companies instruct their employees to do this: the lives of the employees are much more valuable than the money. The cash can be replaced, but their lives can't.

Given the choice between putting their lives on the line to protect what is in their care and letting it be taken by someone who is threatening them, it makes sense for employees to save their own lives and hand over the money in their cash register.

Now, this theory might sound pretty good, but we know all too well that there are times when it's not that simple. For example, at a school shooting in the US some years ago, a security guard at the school was heavily criticised afterwards for remaining outside the building, even though he could hear gunshots inside the classrooms. We can wonder why he didn't enter the school building to confront the shooters, but it could be possible that he was doing something similar to what retail employees are taught to do: that you shouldn't put your life at risk because you can't get it back.

All humans have the instinct for self-preservation. What the retail trainers and what the security guard at the school show us is that we have a natural tendency to want to save our lives, even if it comes at the expense of others.

And yet, we know this is not *always* what happens. Last week, at the shopping centre in Bondi, a security guard and a number of others *did* risk their own safety for others. This coming Thursday, we will observe ANZAC day, stopping to remember those who gave their lives to fight for their country and protect their loved ones.

Thinking back to the school shooting in the US, we might wonder if things would have been different if the security guard had known personally any of the staff or students inside, or whether a parent or teacher would have acted differently in the security guard's position.

Jesus talks about this contrast in John 10:11-18 when he describes the difference between a hired hand who is employed to look after a flock of sheep and himself,

the Good Shepherd, who “know[s] [his] sheep and [his] sheep know [him]— just as the Father knows [him] and [he] know[s] the Father” (vv14-15). He says in verse 12, “The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away.”

The hired hand follows the retail training model and our human instinct for self-preservation by leaving the sheep when they are threatened by a wolf. The Good Shepherd, however, knows the sheep and values each sheep so highly that he willingly lays his life down for them.

When we stop to think about it, this is a pretty disturbing image. Jesus isn't saying that the shepherd scares the wolf away or fights it off. Instead, the Good Shepherd places himself between the sheep in his care and the wolf that is threatening them. He willingly lets the wolf kill him. In verse 18 He says “No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.”

And, assuming the wolf is hungry, He willingly lets the wolf feast on his carcass while the sheep escape to safety. This is not exactly a G-rated image, and right now it is all too close to home. But Jesus wants to show us the lengths he will go to for those in his care because he places such a high value on each of his sheep. This is the way he values each and every one of us!

In the verses preceding Jesus' words about being the Good Shepherd, he contrasts Himself with thieves, who come to 'steal and kill and destroy', robbing us of the 'life to the full that Jesus promises in verse 10.

In verse 12, He describes how the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it when the hired hand runs away. We all face thieves and wolves in our lives who want to take life from us in some way, or to divide and scatter us. Sometimes those thieves and wolves might be fear, guilt, shame, or hopelessness. At other times they might take different forms, or go by different names, but their intention is still the same – to steal life from us, and to separate us from our flock and our Shepherd.

That's when the Good Shepherd steps in to protect us. He knows the threats we face and He places himself between us and the wolves that endanger us so we can find safety and freedom through his sacrifice for us.

Jesus our Good Shepherd took the worst of this world's evils on himself in his suffering and death so we can find comfort in his presence with us. Jesus died with all our sin and guilt on the Cross so we can find forgiveness in him.

When we are threatened by shame, remember Jesus endured our shame as he hung on the Cross, stripped of His clothing, in full view of the people who passed by. Through the Cross and the Resurrection, He now clothes us with his goodness and perfection. When hopelessness approaches, our Good Shepherd, who is risen from the grave and whose love is stronger than death, gives hope through faith in his resurrection from the dead.

No matter what may threaten to rob us of life, Jesus our Good Shepherd took the full force of the threat in His suffering and death so we can live each and every day in his protection, freedom, peace and hope.

Jesus does all of this because each one of us is so valuable to him. Matthew ends his version of the Parable of the Lost Sheep with Jesus saying, 'it is not my heavenly Father's will that even one of these little ones should perish' (18:12-14). Each and every sheep in the flock is precious to the Good Shepherd, including those sheep that Jesus promises to bring into the fold from elsewhere in verse 16, those not yet part of the Church.

We could easily go on at this point to how we, as followers of Jesus, should also be willing to give our lives for others. We probably already know we should be willing to lay down our lives for others, and many of us will get up early on Thursday or stop throughout the day to remember soldiers who have, but this brings us back to the beginning of the sermon: we still have our natural instinct for self-preservation. It is part of our human condition. That's why *Jesus'* love is so amazing. He knows us well enough to know that it's not in our nature to willingly give up our lives for others unconditionally, but he still does that for us. In fact, that's precisely the reason why He does that for us and why *only* He could do that for us. For me. For you. Not just as His friends, a stranger turned neighbour in the shopping centre, or even as a soldier fighting for His country.

Jesus laid down His life for us while we were still sinners, in fact while we were His *enemies*. *That's* why he's the Good Shepherd, why he can be trusted, and why he's worth following into a new kind of life. Amen.