

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Happy Mother's Day!

I thought as today is Mother's Day and Good Shepherd Sunday, we could have a look at these two roles and what they mean for us in 2019.

First of all, Mothers. Now most of us have a mother of some kind. Now your mother may have been amazing or your mother may have been less than amazing, maybe even dysfunctional or absent. Perhaps you were raised or nurtured by someone other than your mother. Whatever the case, it is true that we did, or do all indeed have a mother; we simply couldn't be here without her. Along with having mothers, most of the women here are mothers or have had a mothering role of some kind at some point in their lives. It could be argued that motherhood is important, very important in fact, we just wouldn't be here without mothers. But not all mothers are alike. For the most part, motherhood is all about relationship and often, sacrifice, but its also really hard work.

For me, motherhood was and is my greatest achievement. There is something uniquely satisfying in knowing that I have co-created with God. But motherhood didnt come with a rule book, or instruction manual. I once

joked with my mother in law that motherhood is the only job that you get, with no experience or training, and that theres no play book to help.

Although there are many, many many books, articles, podcasts etc out there on motherhood which aim to teach or inform, the truth is, there is no one manual to exactly predict what your experience of motherhood or even parenthood for that matter will be like. Motherhood is a unique relationship, and as a relationship, it doesn't know how to read those books and it doesn't usually follow the rules, rather it grows and develops its own unique place in the world, unique, like every individual ever. Motherhood is more complex and nuanced than any one book can capture, its about emotion, feeling, sensing, intuition, perseverance, dogged determination, pigheadedness, joy, confusion, exhaustion, worry, grace, happiness, sadness, fulfilment, beginning, conclusion, love, anger, fulfilment, or add your words here....

Motherhood is my greatest success, whilst carrying with it some of my greatest failures all in one, or rather five, humans who live, love and exist because of me.

But I honestly believe in my role as mother, and can relate to God as parent because of my roles as daughter and mother. Motherhood is relationship that you can totally understand, albeit from your own perspective. Within your own context, you all immediately have an idea, picture or framework from which you operate and understand, this is how it was for Jesus speaking of being a good shepherd. Immediately those listening could and did understand his context and framework. The relationship he was speaking about, even though the players were different. The relationship between sheep and shepherd, was as familiar and understandable as is the relationship between a mother and child.

Immediately those listening, knew what Jesus was speaking about. They understood the metaphor, the language and the imagery of the good shepherd. They also knew the scriptures, the psalms, Ezekiel, that spoke of the covenant between God and humanity; the promise that God would come and be humanity's greatest and only good shepherd. They completely understood the connection between God and Jesus shepherding the flock of humans through life. This is not a stretch for them.

It is a bit more of a stretch for us, however. We have lost the imagery of the ancient Bedouin shepherd. We tend to rely on nice pictures of Jesus

shepherding rather than truly understand the nuance of what it really means. At its core, Jesus knew that being the Good shepherd ultimately meant relationship between God and humanity and that that relationship would be joined and connected forever, because of the trust and commitment of both.

Jesus understood a shepherd to be a leader, but not a leader like we might immediately think. A shepherd leads his sheep from within the middle of the pack. They don't lead from in front or behind, but rather from among.

There's a reason for this. The shepherd becomes a part of the flock, part of the whole; the shepherd becomes a sheep if you like, trusted and accepted as one of the flock and so works best from within. A shepherd will take on the look of the sheep and definitely the smell of them.

There is a common misconception that sheep are dumb animals. That sheep don't know any better than to blindly follow any idiot with a crook. This is simply not true. If the shepherd were an idiot, the sheep would definitely not trust him and they certainly wouldn't follow him. They are actually incredibly smart, they will herd together closely if they perceive danger, they will filter the young to the centre of the flock, so that they are safe from accidentally being left behind or targeted by predators. When

sheep come to a watering hole or a feeding plain, they are able to happily mix and mingle with dozens of different flocks and herds and share the resources available. This was true of the model of biblical shepherd.

Itinerant shepherds would periodically come together to water their flocks at a common public wells and then they might spend the evening with their fellow shepherds, sharing a meal, catching up on the news of the day, all while the sheep happily grazed, slept and dwelt together.

To anyone else, all the sheep would look the same. It would look from the outside like one large flock or mob of sheep, with no indication of which sheep belong to which shepherd. But the Shepherds know which sheep are theirs and more importantly, the sheep know which shepherd is theirs.

Cattle people will tell you they never let their herds mix with one another. It would be nigh impossible to separate them again. Mistakes would always occur. But sheep are different, when it is time to go, the shepherd will call his sheep in his own particular way and his sheep will extricate themselves from the bigger flock and happily follow their own shepherd, with no question that they are following the wrong shepherd or in the wrong flock. Doesn't sound like a dumb animal to me.

The sheep know the shepherd and the shepherd knows his sheep. This is as true today as it was in Jesus' time. Maybe not for the huge sheep farmers, but for the small Bedouin peasant family, they are. People of Jesus time, understood the worthiness of sheep, not only for what a sheep could produce; its wool, milk and meat, but also for its value for sacrifice, either to enable worship or in the keeping of the law within community. We only have to think about the Passover story to remember this.

In today's reading, Jesus uses this very common imagery and words as himself as the Good shepherd. All people listening to Jesus, knew instinctively what he meant by his words. This story carries on from earlier. And as its thrust is teaching that other sheep will become a part of God's flock. The story, the scriptures, Jesus are teaching that God and Jesus are one. One shepherd, one leader, one God, one flock. This is what upset the Pharisee so much and what confused the disciples and is the only imaginary that they cant completely understand.

We've had years to absorb this truth, this Trinitarian truth. WE do believe that God the Father and Jesus are one in the same; one God. We believe in the outworking of the spirit of God in Jesus, its what gives us our identity and purpose as christians. It's the expression we use to describe our

relationship with God. We use it just as completely and easily as Jesus used the image of the shepherd. And because we believe Jesus is truly God, who else could be the shepherd, but God himself, manifest in his Son, who is already the good shepherd of the sheep, us.

To continue the metaphor, the sheep of course are not sheep. The sheep are us. Humanity is God's flock and if we understand Jesus correctly, then Jesus as God is right in the middle of us, his flock, leading from within, guiding, protecting, teaching.

Jesus is still shepherding his flock; us. To show us the way, to help us shepherd also, to encourage us to be minor shepherds, bringing those strays back to the fold, back to God. That's who we are, minor shepherds, shepherding our own little flocks, bringing them to the watering hole of God's kingdom to join the bigger Christian flock, to see the good shepherd who is in charge and still leading us forward.

For us who live in the resurrection, Jesus was and is our shepherd, he calls us by name just as he did to Mary on that first Easter Sunday at the tomb. He beckons us to follow where he leads and he comes looking for us when we decide to go off on our own and follow the direction of false shepherds,

especially the false shepherds of the world like money, distraction and individuality.

He calls us back to him, to the flock, to the group. He calls us into a continued relationship with him and through him. Just as sheep need to live and have their being as a community who follow one shepherd so we need to mirror this and live and work as a cohesive community who live and have our being in Jesus, our Good Shepherd.

Let us always nurture our relationship with good shepherd, just as we nurture our relationships with each other.

The lord be with you.