

11 May 2025 Easter 4 REFLECTION Rev Wayne Toleafoa

THE DIVINE SHEPHERD

Readings: Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

This week will be a very funereal week for me and for several families.

Tomorrow I will be taking part in the celebration of life of one of my oldest surviving aunts, aged 94 . On Tuesday I will attend another life-celebration of a 94-year-old cousin . And on Thursday we will farewell a much-loved member of our congregation – Beth Clothier - 92 years old.

This week the Catholic Church and all Christians farewelled an old Pope and a new American/Peruvian Pope was elected.

One of the quotes attributed to the new Leo XIV is:

That ‘our greatest joy comes through knowing Christ ‘.

I believe that too, that our greatest joy comes through knowing Christ, or knowing the God whom we see in the life and person of Jesus. But when you are in that grieving space – three funerals/farewells in a row, it’s hard to feel the joy of knowing Christ/God. But there is comfort in knowing that whether we live or die, we are in the Lord’s ‘hands’.

In life or in death we are held in the love of God - the God in whom we live and move and have our being. Or in Paul Tillich’s words, we are in the God who is, ‘the Ground of our being’.

Even though I and the families of the 3 women I've mentioned are grieving. We must also remind ourselves of the thousands of deaths that have happened/and are happening in the warring nations around the world. The grief felt in Gaza, the Ukraine and now in India and Pakistan who have joined that club of warring nations.

We live rather sheltered lives in Havelock North.

All three of Scripture readings today are about that sacred space between heaven and earth. In that sacred space, people of old, saw the image of God as Good Shepherd. The Shepherd image is a recurring theme in all three readings.

We are human, we are ‘matter’ (flesh and blood), but as believers, we also exist in the sacred space between this life and the life to come.

In our first reading, the much-loved Psalm 23, the psalmist, David, talks about having no fear even when walking in the darkest valley (the valley of the shadow of death...KJV)

The Psalmist writes of (him) being in God's constant care – he/we are like the sheep in the constant care of the divine shepherd. His rod and staff offering safety and protection to the sheep.

The Psalmist writes of the abundance that accompanies the presence of the divine shepherd: *“you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long. ‘forever’ (KJV)*

We live in this physical world and yet we belong to an invisible world that we call, ‘the kingdom’ of God, or the reign of God. It is that realm that is ‘The Ground of our Being’.

Every time we pray. Every time we turn our thoughts to God. Every time we express compassion. Every time we express gratitude for life - we are entering the Kingdom of God. Crossing the thresh hold between earth and heaven.

Our second reading from Revelation 21 is even more ethereal than Psalm 23.

Revelation 21 is the last chapter of the New Testament. It is about a ‘new heaven and a new earth’ that God is creating.

The Book of Revelation is a magnificent piece of apocalyptic literature that has caused a lot of confusion - especially many years after it was written. The further away we get from the time it was written, the more confusing it gets.

Apocalyptic literature is a fascinating genre that typically explores visions of the end times. Many apocalyptic texts are written under the name of a revered figure from the past. Like John the Divine who is credited with writing Revelation.

Apocalyptic literature is rich in imagery, often using cryptic symbols to convey deeper meanings. Unlike straightforward prophecy, apocalyptic literature often unfolds as a story or vision.

The visions typically depict the current world as corrupt or doomed, emphasizing an impending crisis, universal judgment, and supernatural resolution.

Revelation has all of these characteristics.

Many Christian Fundamentalists believe that Revelation describes events that are yet to come, which is true in the sense that God is always creating. We, and the universe, are in the process of evolving into something new. We are part of an ongoing creation.

But this is also where many of us part company with the Fundamentalists. Many of them believe that God will cause a great catastrophe at the end of time and only a few people will be spared.

NT scholar and former Anglican Bishop Tom Wright, in his commentary on Revelation, explains that the catastrophic events described in the Book of Revelation fit very well with the Christian persecution during the reign of Nero 54 to 68 AD. In other words, the events in Revelation may have already happened, and we have no reason to fear the future. Unless we ruin the planet ourselves.

The picture that today's reading paints, is one of joy!

People from every nation and every language and culture gathered around a throne of the Lamb of God – all singing God's praises.

The writer of Revelation goes on to say:

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?' I said to him, 'Sir, you are the one that knows.' Then he said to me, 'These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'

As I have alluded to earlier in Tom Wright's Commentary on Revelation: The Great Ordeal in Revelation, could well be describing the great persecution of Christians which took place in the time of Nero. Those who survived had every reason to rejoice. This passage in Revelation describes a past event not something that will happen in the future.

In the vision Jesus is both the Shepherd and the Lamb.

In our final reading from John 10:22-30 Jesus again refers to himself as The Shepherd.

But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand. I and my Father are one.

I have never been a shepherd, but I can just imagine a shepherd who has worked with the same flock, will become a familiar figure and a familiar voice among the flock. More so than some stranger who just happened to be visiting.

Our way of becoming familiar with the Shepherds voice and presence is to listen to God's voice in the Scriptures, listen to the voice of the shepherd through the Holy Spirit speaking to our hearts and minds convicting us to act and live in certain ways that are in accordance with God's will. We may also hear God's voice through the voices of people who love us.

I found our readings today to be a bit sombre. Maybe because I've Got three funerals to think of this week - but- I would like to end this reflection on a happy note by reminding you all that it is Mothers' Day and asking you to reflect on how your mother has been a shepherd or shepherdess in your life.

PRAYER

Almighty ever-living God, lead us to share once more in the joy of knowing You, The Good Shepherd. Lead us in the paths of righteousness for your name's sake. Make us grateful for all that you have done and are still doing in our world. Help us to know You and live forever in your heavenly reign. Amen.