



Image: Shutterstock, Australian Geographic.

Breaking Open the Word

Easter 4B

21st April, 2024
St Peters by the Lake, Paynesville

The Rev'd Dennis Webster
Rector

Acts 4.5-12
Psalm 23
1 John 3.16-24
John 10.11-18

Today's readings address rejecting evil and injustice, using relatable examples like the nurturing care of an emu to illustrate sacrificial love. Drawing from Acts, Psalms, and John, he discusses the transformative power of love as seen in Jesus and his disciples' actions. By aligning with God through prayer and embodying Christ's love, we can be beacons of light in a world overshadowed by darkness. The sermon concludes with a reflection on the struggle between good and evil, urging the congregation to be the hands and voice of Jesus in a broken world by showing love through actions.

Renouncing all evil

I love using contemporary life to tell the Good News of Jesus Christ. You will hear me spout about wombats and emus, science fiction (especially BBC-inspired storytelling), music in all its forms, and even country of an Australian variety. I have doubts about some of the Western varieties, but I do take the opportunity to plug in the Blues Afternoon to be held later today.

Well, today, you are getting most of that all in one sermon, and despite what some people suggest, yes, I am relating most of it to the scriptures. We no longer live in the resurrection world of Jesus. Enough is going on in the world for us to reject all that is evil and unjust now, as we could apply to the time of Paul and John in their epistles. Like Jesus, and indeed Paul, to help communicate God's desire, things were related daily. The parables always point to the Kingdom of God using everyday things.

Paul found himself in trouble at two sacred sites in the Hellenic world, using local issues and awareness to help 'sell' the Gospel. I say 'sell' because at the Temple of Artemis, he was gaoled for upsetting the local tinsmith's trade of 'godettes', and again in Athens at the Areogapus when he identified the "unknown God."

So, let's turn to Australian Country music, John Williamson, to be precise, although I also mention the one-hit wonder in the Pew Bulletin, Bob Hudson's "The Newcastle Song." With John Williamson, there was a popular program showcasing Australian country music called "Travellin' out West", and his first-ever hit, based on the song he used to win "New Faces" in 1970, has been my constant companion and earworm. This week! I refer, of course, to "Old Man Emu." But it was in Uncle Ron Williams's retelling of the beloved twenty-third psalm that triggered this all off.

A perfect example of how the First Nations people understood shepherding was looking at the emus. I'll let Australian Geographic explain this more clearly.

Paternal care is high on the agenda for the emu, with the mother helping to build a nest, then laying five to 15 dark green eggs, and then the dad steps in. The female emu leaves her eggs to breed again, leaving the male to forgo food and water for around 55 days while he incubates the eggs, losing up to eight kilos. The father stays with the newly born chicks for six months, teaching them to find food and keeping them safe until they reach maturity at 20 months.

Well, my dear sisters, does your man need to lose 8 kilograms? Ahh, nothing is impossible for God! But what an excellent image.

Back to my list, emus, done. Country music is done. Newcastle Song is almost done.

It was the chorus, “Don’t ever let a chance go by, O Lord, don’t ever let a chance go by.” that also turned the bad soil in my ears into something fertile. In our journey at looking at our baptismal promises, we get to “renouncing evil and all that is unjust.” This is where words can make a difference, but sometimes, words without actions are ‘clanging cymbals’. When called people of love, we understand it is not a noun but a verb. It is an action word. We are called to be, as the body of Christ, individually and collectively, lovers of all God’s creation, and yes, that includes, at times, people we may consider to be ‘hard work.’

Sometimes, our actions challenge our status quo. I’ve mentioned Paul in Ephesus and Athens and how his words led to actions that were not exactly easy. He was, as we know, imprisoned, beaten, shipwrecked, and forced to take up tent-making to survive. He was also argumentative, strong-willed, and a sinner for whom ‘turning to Christ’ was a dramatic and life-changing event. In the Acts reading, Peter and John’s action of giving the beggars the goodness they did have, that is, healing and wholeness in the name of Jesus, placed them, like Paul, at odds with the hierarchy. Sensing that there could be capital and spiritual gains, the Sanhedrin or Temple leaders sought to gain advantage from their actions.

In Acts 4:5-12, we witness the courage and conviction of Peter and John as they stand before the religious authorities, boldly proclaiming the name of Jesus Christ as the source of healing and salvation. They embody the essence of love in action, fearlessly spreading the message of hope and redemption despite facing persecution and opposition.

Psalms 23 vividly describes the nurturing care of the Good Shepherd. During life’s trials and tribulations, we find profound solace in knowing that our Shepherd leads us beside still waters and restores our souls. His unfailing love provides comfort and a deep sense of assurance, guiding us through the darkest valleys with unwavering grace—no wonder the First Nations people use the emu image to understand Jesus, the good shepherd.

The epistle of 1 John further emphasises the profound transformative power of love. In 1 John 3:16-24, we are reminded that love is not merely a sentiment but a tangible expression of Christ’s sacrificial love for us. As recipients of such boundless love, we are not just called but empowered to demonstrate love through our

actions, extending compassion and kindness to those in need. By living out the love of Christ, we not only bear witness to God's presence in our lives but also become powerful beacons of light in a world overshadowed by darkness.

And finally, in John 10:11-18, Jesus reveals himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep. He knows His own and is known by them, calling each of us by name and leading us into abundant life. As we cultivate a deeper relationship with the Good Shepherd, His voice becomes familiar, guiding us toward righteousness and protection from harm.

How do we heed the call to love in action? We are called to be agents of reconciliation and peace in a world marred by division and strife. This calls on us to reach out to the marginalised and oppressed, extending a hand of friendship and solidarity. Not all of us are called to be Les Twentyman or Mother Theresa! We are empowered with the most essential resource to use first, although many use it as their last resource. Prayer. We are being one with God and allowing God to transform our lives and the lives of others through prayer and then through word and action. We may act vicariously, recognising that we may not have the gifts required to make a difference in person, but we can empower those best placed to excel.

We can make a difference in small ways through our interactions of love expressed in thought, word, and deed.

I have one more thing to tick off today: BBC Science Fiction. I'll admit it: I am a fan of Doctor Who, be it the definitive, first and original, you might say, or the second coming. I'll reserve my judgment on the Disney incarnation for the moment. In the writing of the second era, there was a profound theology underpinning many stories. Good and evil. It was only recently that I was reminded that even in the show's inception, back before I was born (!), the entire canon of the series was built on a few simple but fundamental principles.

Three quotes from the first Doctor, as portrayed by William Hartnell, and latterly David Bradley.

- ▶ "Good men don't need rules."
- "Love is not an emotion. It's a promise."

And then there is this speech:

First Doctor: It is good, and it is evil. I left Gallifrey to answer a question of my own. By any analysis, evil should always win. Good is not a practical survival strategy - it requires loyalty, self-sacrifice and love. So, why does good prevail? What keeps the balance between good and evil in this appalling universe? Is there some kind of logic? Some mysterious force?

Companion Bill Potts replied. Perhaps there's just some bloke wandering around, putting everything right when it goes wrong?

Indeed, could that one bloke wandering around be the Body of Christ?

We have all been troubled this last week by the events in Sydney, Gaza, Iran and Syria. We have witnessed grief, anger, and unwarranted political grandstanding. We have seen many things, yet all through this journey in the light of the resurrection, we are called to witness all the things, the good that one bloke, wandering around 2000 years ago, calls us to do. He is the voice that calls out to the lost sheep. He is the voice that begins to relate to people and help them on their journey, no matter how frightened they may be. He is the Old Man Emu who cradles us and teaches us. This is the Body of Christ. And we are the Body of Christ, for his Spirit is with us.

We are called to express our love in action and not inaction.

We are called to emulate the example of Peter and John, courageously proclaiming the name of Jesus Christ in both word and deed. And like Paul and Jesus, we are called to relate to people in the real world in which they live, for that is where life is and love is needed.

As we journey together as a community of faith, may we grow in love and become ever more attuned to the voice of the Good Shepherd. And may his love empower us to overcome evil with good, transforming hearts and minds with the redemptive power of Christ's love.

Discussion Starter

- ▶ “If you were an animal, which would make the best superhero sidekick and why?”

Group Discussion

How can we demonstrate sacrificial love and commitment, like the male emu First Nation folklore?

The example of the male emu's dedication to incubating eggs and caring for chicks is a symbol of love and commitment.

What is one specific way you can show sacrificial love to others?

How can we embody love in action, like Peter and John in Acts 4:5-12?

Peter and John were courageous in proclaiming Jesus' name, demonstrating love through their actions.

Can you think of a practical example where you might boldly express your faith in Jesus and show love to others?

What tangible expressions of love can we practice, as stated in 1 John 3:16-24?

The passage emphasises that love is not just a sentiment but an action; we should express Christ's sacrificial love for humanity.

What is a specific act of kindness you could do for someone in need this week?

How can we become more attuned to the voice of the Good Shepherd, as mentioned in John 10:11-18?

Jesus is revealed as the Good Shepherd who knows and leads His sheep, and we are all encouraged to cultivate a deeper relationship with Him.

What is one spiritual practice you can incorporate into your daily life to deepen your relationship with Jesus?

What are some ways of expressing love through thoughts, words, and deeds, even for those who may not possess specific gifts?

The sermon suggests that different acts of love can create positive change, even without particular skills.

How can you use your unique talents and abilities to demonstrate love in your community?

Prayer Prompts:

- Ask God to help us apply the sermon's message of renouncing all evil and unjust practices in our lives.
- Pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance in demonstrating sacrificial love and commitment, just as the male emu cares for its eggs and chicks.
- Seek God's strength to boldly proclaim the name of Jesus Christ in our actions, spreading hope and redemption to those around us.
- Pray for the transformative power of love to be evident in our lives as we extend compassion and kindness to those in need.



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Further reading:

Jane Williams, Lectionary Reflections, Year B

Today's readings are deeply challenging. Christian mission has sometimes been done as though determined to prove that we are right and everyone else is wrong, whereas all of today's writers think that Christians must preach and show Jesus Christ because that is actually how the world is.

Love, cost and purpose are the themes of the description that Jesus highlights, but purpose is the one that often gets left out. One flock, one shepherd, Jesus says, that's the goal. The flock will come really to know the voice of Jesus, and the love of Jesus, which is also the voice and the love of God.

The sheep come to know the voice of the shepherd because it is the voice that they have learned to associate with care, safety, warmth, food. In a crisis they will trust the shepherd because he has proved himself trustworthy before, in providing for their basic needs. The sheep would not have come to trust the shepherd if he had come out and given them a sermon a day. His voice would not be the one they loved and believed if they had not experienced it first as the voice of practical care.

This is certainly the point being made in 1 John. 'Let us love not in word or speech but in truth and action,' the epistle urges. The words are the easy bit. They cost the speaker very little, but equally they yield very little. The sheep wander off, unfed and unprotected, because they do not recognize this unfamiliar voice. It has never done anything for them. Christian shepherds, like Jesus, have to build up the trust of the sheep, and be prepared to redeem it at great personal cost, if necessary.

We have to live in the world as though we really did believe that Jesus, the good shepherd who lays down his life to save us, is the way of God.

We have to live together, one flock with one shepherd, as though we knew that this is what we were made for. Any other way of living is out of tune with the whole purpose of the universe. Luckily, the voice of the good shepherd is still heard in the Holy Spirit, since we still need to learn how to be shepherds ourselves.

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