

“Pastures Green” a sermon based on Acts 2:42-47 and John 10:1-10 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 3 May 2020

It can be accessed from the Knox Church YouTube Channel

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCYksSjG0llf00NeogNIGs7A>.

or from the Knox Church website – <https://knoxchurch.net/>

Prayer - Gracious shepherd, help us hear your voice and bring us through the gate to abundant life. In Christ we pray. Amen.

On Tuesday, as New Zealand moved from level 4 to level 3, we entered a different world, more like the old world.

The noise grew and spread and echoed across the valleys and became our background again.

It drowned out the sounds we'd heard over recent weeks– the birds, the wind in the trees, the dogs barking, and it took the silence.

Returning is important for rebuilding businesses and putting people to work so they can earn and eat.

And yet, for some there was a reluctance, a nervousness about returning -

- We haven't finished the list of home jobs;
- We feel more safe distanced from others;
- We don't want to go back because the old way had its challenges;
- We've prayed more, meditated more, were quiet more and we don't want to leave that behind;
- We were anxious before anyway and this gave us time to recentre our lives.

A nervousness.

What if that nervousness arises from a deeper longing, a more significant unease, carrying a call to greater wholeness?

Jesus uses two images – shepherd and gate - and gives us choices, choices about whether and what we leave, how we leave, and what we make of where we go.

In my Bible, chapter 10 in the gospel of John is headed “the good shepherd”.

In the original Bible there were no headings or chapters or verses.

It was clear that the stories today continued the one before.

The one before is about Jesus healing a man born blind and being castigated for doing so.

People couldn't imagine healings like this especially on the sabbath so they wouldn't allow it or those who talked about it.

They drove out the man born blind.

But the man born blind could see what they could not see.

He became a follower of Jesus and he became part of a community of followers.

Jesus says that the shepherd knows his sheep and calls them out, which is exactly what Jesus did to the man born blind.

And maybe he is doing it again, to us, now.

Knowing us, the world we inhabit, what we are going through, and what our world might be, perhaps Jesus is trying to open our eyes, to lead us to pastures green.

Perhaps COVID-19 is part of that call.

There has been talk of the virus as the enemy that needs to be conquered.

If we were thinking in terms of the shepherd story, the virus would be the bandit or the thief that steals the sheep and threatens their life.

That kind of image is used to galvanise us into action, to unite us against a deadly foe, to give us a sense of how much is at stake.

But what if there is a deeper call in this virus?

An enemy is something to be fought, resisted, pushed away.

But what if the virus is more a messenger, a courier, a sharp prod?

Not that the virus was sent by God, but in the midst of it, what if the shepherd is calling us out?

Thomas Friedman in the New York Times asks whether Mother Nature is telling us that we have let things get out of balance, that we have ravaged ecosystems, that we need to get back into balance, starting with using the immune system we have.

Friedman wonders if it is a call to see our body in a different way, less like a self-contained vessel, defined by our genetic code and ruled by our brain, and more like "a microbial ecosystem that sweeps along in atmospheric currents, harvesting gases, bacteria, phages, fungal spores, and airborne toxins in its nets."

What if the virus is a call to restore the balance of our world?

Jesus said - "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly."

He pictures sheep coming and going safely, thriving in green pastures.

Friedman reminds us that as people farmed and foraged, dipped their hands in common bowls and greeted one other with a touch, they engaged in rituals that bound them together with their neighbours and other organisms.

This is not a call away from washing and wiping and physical distancing.

But a call to recognise that we are microbially connected with each other and with this earth, and that the call is to live in pastures green, with all that that picture evokes and with all the microbes pastures have.

Acts 2 describes a church living that vision, embodying that call.

All who believed were together and had all things in common.

A people so caught up in the life of Jesus that they became a community where people shared what they had, where life in the temple and life at home was one, where they ate with glad and generous hearts, and there was a constant flow of people, coming and going, safely and freely, growing in Spirit.

So is COVID-19 really an enemy or is it a messenger?

And if a messenger, is it bringing us the call to be a community that embodies the vision of a world in balance, green pastures, here, now?

A prayer – Jesus, shepherd, lead us out. Jesus, gate, be our way. Jesus, life, nourish abundant life. Amen

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made known in Jesus, given in grace***



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