

**Sermon: “Whose are we, Who are we, What we do”: Acts 2: 42-47;
Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2: 1-10; John 10: 1-10**

Introduction

Some of you would know that I have a deep and lifelong interest in discipleship. Recently, I read a book by David and Paul Watson (father and son) called “Contagious Disciple Making”. It is, in part, a “how to” book, but it had a few comments and statements which made me ponder. In particular, in the chapter relating to church, was the statement: “whose are we, who are we, and what we do” (page 160). Today’s readings prompted me to think even more deeply on this question, so let us explore “whose are we, who are we, and what we do”, noting that there is some overlap between the three points.

So, whose are we?

Unequivocally, today’s Gospel reading answers this. We belong to Jesus: we are His sheep and flock (vv.2, 3b-4, 16); “He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out” (v.3); we know and hear His voice and follow Him (v.4).

In verse 7 of the Gospel reading, the imagery of Jesus changes from being a shepherd to being the gate of the sheepfold. We are told that in Jesus, “the gate”, we are saved (v.9a) and our needs met – we can “come in and go out, and find pasture” (v.9b).

The imagery of the shepherd with his sheep and of the gate (and also Psalm 23) describes the intimate relationship between Jesus and us. This is reflected in that he knows us and calls us by name, we know and hear His voice and follow Him (John 10:3-4), he is present with us, comforts and cares for us, meets our needs, and saves us – He gives us life, and we can have it to the full (v.10). For our part

we are to listen to Jesus and follow him (v.4), and not listen to, or follow other (strangers) voices (vv.5, 8). So, if we are Jesus' flock ...

Who are we?

This is an issue of our more immediate or even "earthly?" identity. A simple answer is that we are "Hope Ginninderra Anglican Church". This is useful to indicate matters like: location(s); style of ministry and worship; church organisation and governance arrangements. But I think our identity is deeper than this and the readings provide other thoughts for us to consider.

For starters, our identity is as sheep (both individually and corporately) – we are Jesus' sheep and part of His flock (John 10). Further in 1 Peter, taking imagery from the Old Testament, we are also "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession" (v.9a); a people belonging to God – "once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (v.10).

Also, the 1 Peter passage adds that we are "like living stones, being built into a spiritual house" (v. 5) – a spiritual house with Jesus as the cornerstone (vv.6-7). Peter describes Jesus as "the living Stone" (v.4) – he is not static, but alive and life-giving. If we are "like living stones, being built into a spiritual house", then we are to imitate and participate in Jesus' life through the Holy Spirit. And so have an intimate relationship with him, centring our lives (individually and corporately) around him. As living stones in a spiritual house and as a royal priesthood, a holy nation, we are to offer "spiritual sacrifices" (v.5), that is come together with the other living stones to be church and to offer a sacrifice of a holy and faithful life. What might this look like in our everyday life, moves us to the question of "what we do"?

What we do

As God's chosen people, what do we do? Today's Acts passage throws some light on this, with some thoughts from John's Gospel and the 1 Peter reading.

The Acts passage shows in some small detail an aspect of the early church's life and discipleship. This is reflected in that "They devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (v.42). And continues in verse 46 with, "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people." Further, "All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need" (vv.45-46).

In John 10:3 we are told we listen to Jesus voice. How do we listen to Jesus? For the early believers they did this by devoting "themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship" – here teaching and fellowship here are joined together. So, through listening to the apostles, and also through meeting and learning together, they listened to and heard Jesus' voice. The apostles are not alive today, but we can devote ourselves to their teaching by studying scripture, which they were inspired by the Holy Spirit to write. In doing this we fulfil the requirement to "crave pure spiritual milk" (1 Peter 2:2). Here the Greek word used for "spiritual" is derived from the word "logos" (meaning "word", "reasonable", "rightly ordered") and suggests being related to the word of preaching.

Again, in the context of the time the, "breaking of bread" does not necessarily mean holy communion as we know it, but with the eating together. This was

reflective of the practice of fellowship present in Middle East society at the time. It highlights the importance fellowship and shared time together, whether in homes or after the Church Services or anywhere else. Occasionally when I lead services, I may end the service by stating that church is changing location from the worship area to wherever morning tea is being held, so we can “break bread together”.

So where did they meet? They had larger and smaller meetings. They met daily in the temple courts, but they also “broke bread in their homes and ate together” (v.46). These two styles of meetings are complimentary, not separate, where one without the other does not provide us with the total fellowship and community that we need to thrive as Jesus’ flock. So I am of the opinion, that we should all try to do both, noting that many of us do.

Conclusion

So where does this leave us? First, we are “like living stones, being built into a spiritual house”; “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession” and a people belonging to God, who “once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy”. But we are also sheep, belonging in Jesus’ sheepfold where Jesus is the shepherd and gate.

Thus, we give thanks and praise to God the Father and our Lord Jesus, our great shepherd and the gate to the sheepfold, who: has made us a people and desires to have an intimate relationship with us; has shown us mercy and saved us; also guides and nurtures us, and meets our needs. And through the enabling of the Holy Spirit, we are to imitate and participate in Jesus life.

In a changing world, how are we to be Jesus' sheep, how do we imitate and participate in Jesus' life? As one commentator said: "what does it mean for the church to live as Jesus' sheep?" and "what does a church that understands itself as Jesus' sheep look like?" (O'Day, p673). These are serious questions we need to deeply consider. There is no single answer, no one-size-fits-all, although in response a help would be to go back to basics.

Here today's Acts passage helps – i.e., we should focus on apostles' teaching, come together in larger and smaller meetings, practice fellowship and the breaking of bread and prayer. Most of us already do some or all of this in one form or another. However, we should all ask ourselves if we have settled into a familiar and safe complacency? The challenge for us is to prayerfully and carefully, and constantly consider our actions and decisions as we seek to be obedient and to follow Jesus' voice. We might need to change something as our circumstances change. For example, just as in the book of Acts, people came from different places and were welcomed into the body of the church, how do we embrace the "other"? Do we make a place for them? Are we open?