



**The Lighthouse**  
**Rev Richard Bonifant**  
Year B, Easter 4  
1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18  
21 April 2024

In the name of God, Creating, Redeeming, and Giving us Life. Amen.

Some years ago when I had just begun my ministry in another community I found myself preaching on the texts we heard this morning. Jesus the good shepherd is a passage many of us are extremely familiar with. I am no different, and upon discovering that I was to preach on this topic for the first time I did what so many other fledgling preachers have done before me. I remembered things that I had heard others say about this passage, and did my best to plagiarise their ideas. I knew what I was doing wouldn't produce a great sermon, but I did think at the very least, I would succeed in regurgitating enough familiar ideas that those listening would approve.

At the end of the service a retired priest came up to me and simply said, "Well that was a shame. You were doing so well up until now." Talk about sucking the wind out of my sails. After pulling myself back together I did manage to enquire as to just what this elderly priest was getting at. He was very clear that at his age he had heard it all many times before, and what he really appreciated was having something new to think about. It was an incredibly powerful piece of feedback, and in fact these days I very much feel the same way. I have heard many sermons over my nearly fifty years as an Anglican. Memorable sermons do tend to be the ones that surprise us with something new. This of course is a huge challenge at times, because fresh new ideas aren't always easy to find.

That's a long way of saying, when I opened the lectionary back in January to see just what my first sermon in this community would be on, I wasn't exactly thrilled to see this particular text, mostly because so much has been written and shared about it already. This is the passage that has shaped and influenced western understanding of pastoral care in its many forms. It is quite literally one of the places where the expression pastoral care, meaning care of other human beings, is drawn from.

This passage also suggests something about how the church is to live its life, always reaching out to those who are yet to join the flock. Like many metaphors found in scripture this understanding is informative in some ways, but is also open to misinterpretation and exploitation. For example, this passage has been complicit in male dominated church hierarchy that has distorted the intention of this passage by elevating the role of shepherd and denigrating the role of sheep. For many of us to be described as a sheep does not so much suggest participation in a large accepting community, as it does imply blind, unquestioning devotion to a singular leader. I do not believe that this is what Jesus was suggesting, but many church leaders have certainly distorted this narrative in this way to their own benefit.

This passage has also been used to normalise and even glamourise the notion of self-sacrifice, which is not always the virtue some claim it to be. While there are times when we are called upon to make sacrifices, none of us is called to be self-sacrificial all of the time.

This passage further suggests that we are vulnerable and in need of protection from malevolent forces wishing us harm, which again might be true at times, but that interpretation also feels like a starting point for some forms of conspiratorial thinking.

The key point here, is that while there is a time honoured tradition of plucking ancient metaphors from the bible, divorcing them from their original context and reinterpreting them for our times, that process of translation can greatly diminish and distort the intention of those metaphors. Yes, good biblical scholarship can get us closer to understanding the biblical world. But at other times it can take a great deal of mental gymnastics to find real meaning in a metaphor that belongs to another time, place and situation, which we will never fully grasp.

Over the last few weeks we have been watching an adaption of the James Clavell novel *Shogun*. The story which is about the politics of feudal Japan, features an English character who while pivotal to the story, is at a distinct disadvantage as he has no understanding of the culture in which he has found himself. As much as he seeks to understand those he encounters, their worldviews and customs always remain confusing and alien to him. Often his biggest mistakes occurs when this character begins to believe that his understanding is better than it really is. In the same way, regardless of our familiarity with scripture, we must remember that it is wisdom of a culture and world that is deeply different to our own.

I am not saying that we should abandon the attempt to understand scripture well. There is wisdom to be found in readings such as the *The Good Shepherd*, which is why it has been such an enduring part of Christian dialogue, and has so strongly influenced wider western thought. But I do wonder if the historical Jesus might be a little disappointed at the reluctance of many to explore new, fresher, more culturally and contextually relevant metaphors to explore our understanding of what it is to be church in our time.

A few months ago I was asked about my understanding of the place of St-Matthew-in-the-City within the context of Auckland and the wider church. Yes, this may have been during a certain interview that ultimately played a role in how I came to be here now. In answering that question I remembered a cathedral I have visited in the city of Nazareth in modern day Israel/Palestine. This particular cathedral was stylized to resemble a lighthouse. In the years since, I have visited many of the lighthouses that are dotted around our coastline, and have thought about the roles those particular structures play.

Lighthouses have two primary functions. The first is to warn of danger, places where sea vessels may come to harm. These lighthouses mark rocks and reefs, and are typically placed in locations where ship wrecks have already occurred. The second function of lighthouses, is to mark deep channels, places where ships can pass through hazards into

places of safety, or out into the deep waters of the open ocean. I can't help but wonder if this might be a useful metaphor for a community like this one.

Certainly part of the tradition of this community has been to warn others of dangers, to be outspoken on matters of injustice, and to proclaim to the church as a whole that there are still many who are excluded, isolated, and in some cases abandoned by a church they long to be a part of. And in many ways this community has guided good and faithful people to a place of deep water, a place where theology can be argued, debated, and ultimately strengthened. Does that begin to sound like a church you want to be part of? A church that provides guidance away from harm, and towards places of support and nurture? A church that rejects intolerance while embracing exploration, adventure, and discovery? Well if it does, there is a hook. Lighthouses need good light keepers. And not just one lightkeeper, but many. Because, as much as you may love this place, and in some sense feel at home here, there are more waiting to catch a glimpse of a distant light on the edge of the horizon. A light that says, you will be safe here, you will be welcome here, you can be you here.

**Amen.**