

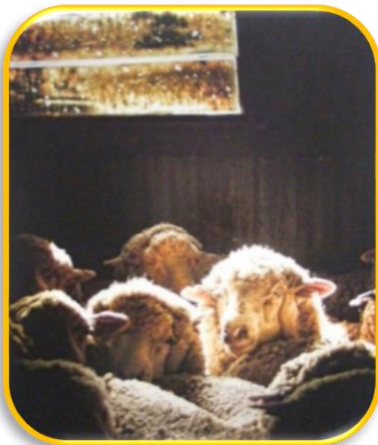
## *“Like a Shepherd : The eyes have it”*

After recently joining the Congregational Eldering Team I was invited to prepare a series of reflections called “Winter-Wise”. These engage life experiences with scriptural insights on four Gospel-based images: Shepherd, Pilgrim, Servant and Prophet. Featured in a recent article by pastoral theologian, James McEnroe, these images and the styles of living that can flow from them impressed the Eldering Team. It then decided to invite the Eldering network to engage in contemplative dialogue and prayer around these themes.

In my first reflection, “*Like a shepherd*”, I recall two incidents in my life that feature sheep. The significance of these deepens I find, as I grow more conscious of God’s Mystery in my life and of the Mystery of being human.

The first incident in 2013 was when I was in the canonical process of seeking incorporation into the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart. Transferring from the Lochinvar Congregation with whom I had lived for 50 years, the decision was momentous. Not a member of the four Federation Congregations fusing with the original Congregation, my journey was individual. I found the personalised support I received from leaders very generous. This included an invitation to spend time with my sense of call within the unique ambiance of Penola.

Early in my stay I was invited to St Joseph’s school to view a variety of art pieces prepared by students with the support of local artists, some of whom supplemented the children’s display with works of their own. Moving around the exhibits, I found myself enjoying images of rural scenes. In particular I was drawn to a series of photographs of people taken beside a variety of pets and farm animals. Then I came upon the following photo:



Instinctively I felt a connection with it  
and an immediate desire to have it.

At first sight I noticed the light of recognition in its eyes  
and felt Jesus’ own words in John 10:

*“I know mine and mine know me”.*

How great would it be, I mused, to have this image  
to enliven my life and my retreat and adult faith enrichment work.

I asked the school principal’s help to contact the photographer. Discovering she was overseas, I emailed her asking if I could purchase the photograph and have her permission to use it in my work. Two days later the principal passed on the image and the photographer’s phoned words to her: “*Give that nun that picture!*”

In all the Gospel work in which I have been engaged since 2013 I have used this image. Displayed in my home it offers a sense of presence as I go about my life. From Pope Francis’ exhortation “*The Joy of the Gospel*” in 2013, I connected this sheep image with his insistent words in # 3 “*I invite all Christians everywhere at this very moment, to a personal encounter with Jesus Christ.*” I always use those words with this image.

Thus it transpired that in the lovely Bindjali / Coonawarra locality around Penola where our Congregation was founded and supported by rural people I came to recognise that being in relationship with Jesus is my keenest longing, supportive of my quest for belonging within our Congregation, of course, but deeper and more crucial to my life even than that. I have come to count this realisation as a gift to me of God’s Spirit and the founders.

Then in 2018 I was appointed to Wiradjuri country in the Riverina district of Southern NSW. I travelled between my home there in Leeton and our retreat centres. It was a long trip of many hours. Without a word of a lie, I can say I delighted in those journeys: the changing vista of sky, trees, paddocks, crops, birds and animals along the way. I felt I was being 'treated' with God's own self-revealing in them. In my own fashion, all my journeys became times of contemplating, of being conscious of the essence of God's presence in everything.

On one of these trips I was driving past the usual flocks of sheep and came upon a mob of kangaroos. Ever aware of road-kill, I decided to drive more slowly, keeping alert to any movement along the way. Eventually I did notice a bush rustling up ahead. Coming towards it very slowly I stopped the car where I thought I had seen the movement. Immediately there was a large very scruffy sheep climbing up the right-hand door of the car and fixing a hoof around my rear vision mirror. It was one of those breeds of sheep that has wool pulled from it rather than shorn. I can say confidently it had been a very long time since any wool had been pulled from that sheep! What shocked me in what happened so suddenly was the terror in the eyes of that sheep as it leant- eyeball to eyeball with me - against my car window. I felt it was crying to me *"Please help me!"*

Naturally, I had never been in this situation before. What I did was instinctive, slowly and rhythmically patting my steering wheel, as I have seen people patting a distressed baby. I kept saying, *"I'm not going to hurt you. It is all right."*

This lasted a few minutes till the sheep slowly eased herself to the ground again, walked relatively calmly to the side of the road and began to feed. It was only then that I noticed her lamb, and a wider perspective on her terror opened up for me.



I drove to the side of the road, stopping the car. I needed time to cogitate on what had just happened, not only to the ewe but to me. Who was the lost sheep and who the lost shepherd? Who was looking for whom?

I thought of Moses in the desert in Exodus 3, where God spoke deliberately of hearing and heeding the cries of suffering people in Egypt and missioning Moses to free them. God's promise to the people was to "be with them" across the generations of their lives. I then thought of Jesus' words from Isaiah 61, quoted in Luke 4. After entering the synagogue of Nazareth he purposely proclaimed his sense of being anointed to fulfill God's mission of untethering those held in suffering to release them to enjoy God's jubilee gifts of joy and freedom.

Aware of some diminishment in myself, I began to wonder if my mission for the sake of Jesus into the future could be more about "being with people" in what distressed them, more than in retreat and faith formation programs? Could I see my life being about helping ease the terror in the eyes and hearts of others, even as I experienced and dealt with certain terrors in my own life-journey? Pondering these thoughts I drove back home to Leeton and began to spend more time drinking more tea and coffee and doing more chatting with elderly widows who had moved to town from their farms after the deaths of their husbands. We spoke sometimes of God and of fears and of hopes, and we prayed simply about their concerns for themselves and their families.

In conclusion, Pope Francis' letter, *The Joy of the Gospel*, holds many reminders that the call to encounter Jesus personally and to live like him with hope and compassion amongst others is what really matters.

*#8. Being a Christian is ... the result of an encounter with the person [of Jesus] ... who gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.*

**If you would like to contact me about anything in this reflection, you are welcome.**  
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### Prayer Possibilities [2]: Prayers and Hymn

In the light of the current sufferings of the peoples of the world, personally or with others, take time to read and reflect on 2 following prayers: **“This Planet of Pain”** and **“Compassion”**.

You are invited then to share our familiar hymn, **“Dream Lady”** in which St Mary of the Cross reminds us to be like Jesus in our life and work together.

#### **“This Planet of Pain” [Bruce Sanguin, *If Darwin Prayed*]**

Now we open to the story of the Crucified and Risen One,  
arms stretched out across the chasm of fear,  
pulling factions into his own broken body, closer to his pierced heart,  
so that this planet of pain may one day claim as its own  
the love flowing out from that sacred, broken heart.

Yes, pull us in, Spirit of the Living God, into the Heart of our hearts,  
that we might once and for all lay down our arsenals of fear  
and take up our tools to build the kin-dom of God for the sake of all creation. Amen.

#### **“Guts and grace, creating our present”, Noel Davis, *The Heart Awakening*.**

The way is compassion, our most precious gift, compassion for ourselves and each other.  
Compassion is of the Divine, the heart of our being truly human, the source of our hope,  
the blood and guts of our relating, the sinews of our commitment to each other.  
Life isn't for the faint hearted, for our lives cry out for all our courage  
and commitment whatever be their shape, or duration.

#### **“Dream Lady”, Kevin Bates sm [Jesus' in synagogue Lk 4:16-19, cf Isaiah 61:1-2].**

Artist: Mary Brady OP



**Refrain:** *The Spirit of God has been given to me  
and his giving has not been in vain.  
The Spirit of God has been given anew,  
that anyone seeking the truth, the life and the way  
may know Jesus Christ is his name.*

Make sure your prisoners go free. Make sure your blind people see.  
Otherwise I've wasted my time, walking around Galilee ... **Refrain**

Make sure the poor hear the Word. Make sure your children are heard.  
Otherwise I've wasted my pain, hanging there in my agony .. **Refrain**

Make sure the hungry are fed, that the homeless ones all have a bed,  
Otherwise I've wasted my life, calling you back from the dead ... **Refrain**

Make sure in breaking my bread, that courage and joy have their head.  
Otherwise I've wasted my love, pouring my spirit, my life ... **Refrain**

### **Prayer Possibilities [1]: Scripture on Shepherding**

You are invited to take silent time to consider the following scriptural texts of God as the Shepherd of God's people [Ezekiel 34:11-16] and of Jesus as the Good Shepherd of the Gospel [John 10: 14; 10:3-4].

Using the style of contemplative prayer to which we've been encouraged, after silent contemplation, share a part of the readings which may have touched you and why.

Allow each person to share, without there being any need for response.

Later, you might like to share where you now see the value of shepherding as an image for being a follower of Jesus.

### **Excerpts, Ezekiel 34:11-16 [with some re-ordering]**

12. I will rescue my sheep from where they have been scattered...
13. I will gather them into their own land...
14. I will feed them with good pasture...
15. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep
12. I will rescue my sheep from where they have been scattered...
13. I will gather them into their own land...
14. I will feed them with good pasture...

### **Excerpts, John 10:14 ;10:3-4; 10. [With some re-ordering]**

14. I am the good shepherd. I know mine and mine know me...
- 3-4. The sheep hear the voice of the good shepherd.  
He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out ...  
and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.
10. I have come that you may have life and have it to the full.