

A Community of Care

Fifth Sunday of Easter (C)

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Last week we celebrated Shepherd Sunday, so named because the Gospel readings for the day are drawn from John chapter 10, where Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd.

We have described ourselves as a set of interlocking communities:

- A community of peace,
- A community at mission,
- A community of care,
- A prophetic community,
- A community of witness.
- A community of power.

The community of peace with Jesus in the midst, is also the community at mission – following our Lord’s lead. Now we come to this third dimension – a community of care, the dimension described by Jesus as being the Good Shepherd. Indeed this concept, has given us the framework for care. We describe what we do as pastoral care, the care of the shepherd.

The third community, the community of care, is the dimension that most would see as a typical understanding of the church. Historically, it is the caring nature of the church that has led to the betterment of our society. Hospitals, Education, Human Rights, Charity to the poor, the needy, the widow etc... have their origins in the church, although many see these now as a government responsibility in this new – post Christian era. The church however is still there, picking up those areas overlooked or ignored by government.

But the fact that we do “care” can lead us into a false sense of identity. We have tended to institutionalise our care with the rise of groups like Anglicare (and their equivalents in other denominations). These are more corporations than church and although efficient in delivery and through their structures access money unavailable to the church, they pose the danger in being detached from our everyday existence as God’s people. Even on our local level, the food centre can become detached from the ‘church’ and develop an existence as a separated entity. Dare I even say it, it is convenient to keep this part of the work out ‘there’ so that we do not have to bother with it here.

That we do care in an institutional or corporate sense does not make us a caring community. That we have set up these things, is to be commended, and is a least an historical recognition, but a caring community is about what I do to another and what they do to me. Tragically, because the church has been an important social institution, and many family and social networks are with in it, our caring can be reduced to looking after our own – our family and/or our friends. Sunday Schools or youth

groups come into existence because we have children that need them and not through any overall ministry plan. And we cater for our own, and not for those who are outside the church framework. Caring should not be seen as an activity but as an attitude, and an attitude that is not shaped by the perceived worthiness of the other. Jesus ministered to all. At the last Supper he washed the feet of Judas who would betray him, Peter who would deny him as well as John who stayed with him. The cross is the ultimate act of care. Jesus gave of himself for the sake of others. As Paul says, "For Christ, while we were still helpless, yet died at the appointed time for the ungodly. Indeed, only with difficulty does one die for a just person, though perhaps for a good person one might even find courage to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us."

We would all like to see ourselves as caring people and forming a caring community, but the caring that we are called to do is the imitation of Christ. It is costly and cross driven. To be caring is more than just giving a few dollars to the flying doctor or Anglicare or the Red Shield Appeal. It is more than just helping out family and friends, it is about demonstrating the inclusive love of God to all. Caring is seeing a need and doing all in our power to alleviate it. (And not seeking to leave it to others to do so).

It is interesting to reflect on what this means.

Perhaps a useful to take a step back and think of what we have done over the last month. If we are a caring community, what have we done to care for the stranger, the person for whom I have no obligation to, other than our shared humanity? What have I done?

It is hard to describe what it means to be a community of care. In a large Ministry Unit such as ours, it is easy to fall into small groups, of kinship or social structure or political or geographic affiliation, but when it is that we step across these boundaries that we start to build this community. We need to move from being just a congregation that meet together on Sundays to a community that shares their lives one with another. This is not the easy path, as it involves risk taking and stepping outside the comfort zone, but our mission in following Christ involves stepping out in faith.

This is part of the call to follow our Lord. Are you ready to try? Can we together strive to build this community of care as a platform for Christ's mission?

Christ is Risen

He is Risen Indeed, Alleluia!

AMEN