

## OTHER SHEEP

Psalm 23

John 10: 7-30 (John 14:6)

April 17 2016

I've got a book in my house called *Jesus and Buddha: The Parallel Sayings*.

As you look through the book on each double page there is one side for Jesus and Buddha is on the facing page.

On the left hand side (even numbers) are words from Jesus, and on the right are printed words from Buddha.

And it's very interesting to see that there are many things that they say that are pretty similar – even if not exactly the same.

The blurb on the back of the book reads *"This remarkable collection of parallel sayings reveals how Jesus and Buddha – whether talking about love, wisdom or materialism – were guiding us along the same path."*

Nowadays, when we are living cheek by jowl with people of other faiths we know much more about different religions, and we know that there are certain traits and beliefs and behaviours that are shared.

There are even ideas and practices in other religions and faiths that are helpful and useful to us as Christians because we know that no group of people possess all the good ideas or know all that can be known.

And on the whole, we can probably agree that the main teachings of the mainline faiths are about good things like connecting to what is spiritual, showing us how best to live, and treating our neighbour with respect even if they are different from us in many ways.

And so when the Muslim shopkeeper Asad Shah is murdered in cold blood in Shawlands for wishing his Christian customers a Happy Easter, we know that Islam is not to blame for the attack, but the sick mind of the thug who committed the crime.

Just as when an American pastor invites his congregation to a bar-b-que at which he burns copies of the Koran, this is not the practice of Christianity we are witnessing but the deranged antics of a bigoted minister.

We know that the purpose and the goal of the major world religions is to lead us to live well, to be kind, to care for those in need, and to work for peace.

Yet despite the big similarities, there are also differences.

Despite the fact that many teachings of Buddha and Jesus are strikingly similar, that not true of all the teachings.

Despite the fact that there are shared values in the great faiths there are often big differences too.

For example, while Christians and Buddhists share a lot of ideas (more so than a lot of people think, in my opinion), the fact is that most Buddhists don't believe that God exists, which is more than a minor difference!

Sometimes people say, at the end of the day, all religions teach the same thing. That's a nice idea but its patently nonsense if you just stop to think.

Some religions teach that there is no God.  
Some teach there is one God.  
Some teach that there are many gods.

Some teach when you die that's the end of everything.  
Some teach that when you die you are with God.  
Some teach that when you die you are reincarnated.

No way do all religions teach the same thing!

Now this is a Christian church.  
And we have just been celebrating Easter, and remembering all that Jesus has done for our world.  
And one of the many meanings we glean from Easter is that the resurrection of Jesus is God saying a big "YES" to Jesus.

One of the things we believe was happening when God raised Jesus was to tell us to pay attention to him. To take note of what he said and did and taught. And part of that is the way in which Jesus pointed to a special relationship with God. It gave rise to the belief we have that Jesus is (and was) Gods Son.

Now if we believe that, then surely one of the reasons we come here and try to follow Jesus is we believe that our faith is right. However poor a job we may be making of living as Christians we must believe that Christianity is in some sense right.

And it begs the question: If we Christians are *right*, does that not mean that others are *wrong*?  
If Christianity is true, does that not mean that other faiths are false?

Let me highlight some words of Jesus from today's reading.

*"I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and they know me. And I am willing to die for them. There are other sheep that belong to me that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them too; they will listen to my voice, and they will become one flock with one shepherd."*

(John 10:14-16)

Other sheep....?

It's a bit of a mysterious phrase, this one.  
What does Jesus mean by '*other*' sheep? Who is he referring to?

Most Bible scholars reckon he meant Gentiles (non-Jews). And I tend to agree.

Despite being a Jew, being part of the Jewish religious tradition and spending most of his ministry with people in the Jewish community, it was clear that the mission of Jesus was for the whole world and not just one group.

In fact that's what annoyed many of the Jews who wanted the Messiah to concentrate solely on them and their needs and didn't fancy a universal message.

So when Jesus talks about other sheep in this instance he's referring here to the thing that was to follow on from this – this body of people who were eventually called the church.

Followers of Jesus would come in all shapes and sizes and from all over the world.

I can't imagine anyone is going to argue with that.  
But is that as far as it goes?

If we in the church can claim to be God's people then does that mean that those outside the church are **not** God's people?

If we are in favour with God, what is the status of those who follow other religious paths?

Let me pull in another verse from Jesus later in this gospel.

*"I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me."*

(John 14:6)

That's quite a statement!

Admittedly it sounds like pretty good news for followers of Jesus - but what about other people?

Given all that we know these days of other faiths and traditions, does that mean that God is not for them?

In the past some Christians have insisted that only Christians are acceptable to God. In fact some have suggested that only certain types of Christians are acceptable and other branches of the church aren't really true Christians. Apart from being a very narrow view of church it's a terrible view of God. To imagine that the God of this world cares only for a tiny minority of human beings and rejects the rest is a horrible thought.

These days people are more likely to suggest the opposite, that because God loves the world God doesn't care what we do or what we believe. And all religions are equally good. It doesn't matter what religious path you pick – they are basically all the same.

The trouble with that view is that it seems as if the life and teaching of Jesus, and Christ's death and resurrection at Easter isn't all that important and is only relevant to one section of people on earth.

My own view on this is that while Jesus is the way to God it does not follow that only people who are card-carrying Christians can get to God.

I am convinced that people who have struggled with belief in God, and people who have tried to follow other faith systems can be accepted by Christ,  
just as I am sure that people who have never heard of Christ or lived before the time of Christ, or who have not had the mental capacity to make a conscious response to Christ, can also be accepted by him.

Getting it right is not about finding acceptance by God or avoiding getting sent to a place called Hell to be punished for all eternity.  
If God truly loves us that is never going to happen.  
That's not what is at stake here.

Getting it right is about **not missing out** on that awareness of God, that knowledge of being loved, that experience of being in a relationship with our Creator, that adventure of following Jesus as our guide through life.

Think of it this way.

Can you live life without having a close friend?  
Of course you can. But your life will be much poorer if you never have any good friends.

Can you live your life totally indoors and never venture into the outside world?  
Of course you can. But your life will be so much poorer if you never saw anything of the world around you.

You can live your life without opening up to the spiritual.  
You can live your life without connecting to God.  
You can live your life unaware that you are precious to God.  
You can live your life unaware of who Jesus was - and is.

But your life will be poorer, because you will have missed out on the wonderful Good News of the Gospel.

And that is the reason it's important for us to share our faith - to be willing to take time to talk with people about spiritual things - not because they will "*fry in hell if they don't obey*" - but because the news of Jesus is good news for **all** of our lives.  
And good news should always be shared.

Let me finish with a story – a kind of wee parable. I've told it before, but good stories are always worth hearing again.

Someone once likened our human search for God to the early days of the Wild West. Settlers would travel in their covered wagons into the unknown territories in search of a new life. It's been the stuff of many a Western movie over the years.

Essential to these travelers was a person called a scout. The scout was a pioneer. (Some of the most famous real life cowboys such as Kit Carson and Buffalo Bill were scouts).

The scout knew the area and went ahead and led them to the safe places – safe from dangers and difficult terrain. The settlers followed their scout wherever he would lead and the scout would guide them and direct them all the way.

A bad scout could result in disaster and death. A good scout meant a successful and safe journeys end..... Scouts were *that* important.

For us as Christians, Jesus is our scout. He is the one who leads us to God. He is the one we need to stick with. He is the one we must follow. His is the path we must tread.

It's like the shepherd in the Psalm.

The scout guides the people to find water and food, leads them through the difficult and dangerous terrain to find the green pastures and quiet waters - rest and safety.

Jesus is our shepherd.

Jesus is our scout.

That doesn't mean that there aren't other scouts.

Some of the other scouts may be good.

Some may be bad.

But *our* concern is to follow the one that we have.

Our concern is to follow the light we have been given.

Our concern is to stick with Jesus for he is the one who (for us) is our path – our route to God.

Jesus is the way the truth and life for *our* journey.

Through him we know we will finally arrive at our destination. We will be with the God who loved us from the very beginning.

What Jesus wants us to know us this: that we can trust in him completely for our journey.