

# What kind of shepherds?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 30 April 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Easter 4 A

Acts 2: 42-47; John 10: 1-10

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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What do sheep and shepherds mean to you? They are very much part of my story but I often struggle with them theologically in today's context.

This photo is from Forest-in-Teesdale, near where I was born. Indeed, the farm in the centre is one I knew years ago, working with local farmers on pressing issues of rural stress and suicide, social and economic survival, and other faith and environmental issues. For sheep and good shepherding, literally and spiritually, is crucial to the Durham Dales.



High on the roof of England, though we once had the greatest silver mine in the world, even subsistence mining of many important minerals is now near impossible. The great hunting lodges of bishops and kings have gone, disappearing with the remaining tree cover swept from the fells. Only occasional rich people's grouse shooting really accompanies sheep today, together with the ambiguous harvest of tourists sampling one of England's last wildernesses. Shepherds, particularly on the highest ground, therefore remain heroic figures to me: extraordinarily resilient, weathering so many vicissitudes; and, above all, deeply, intimately, connected to their/my land and its communities. No wonder Cuthbert, the greatest saint of the North, began life as a shepherd. Sheep, and good shepherding, are part of the lifeblood of my native people.

What however of other peoples? In these lands now called Australia colonial society was notoriously built '*on the sheep's back*'. Whilst that was lifeblood for some, for others it meant the blood of death and dispossession. For in the pioneering work of John Macarthur and others, the sheep was arguably a weapon of mass destruction, and shepherds key players in frontier warfare. So what kind of shepherd do we value today?

In response to today's Gospel reading, and in relation to our four pathways of mission, I want to offer four 'good shepherd' images which arise from different Asian Christian contexts. I hope they may enable further reflections, not least on a key commitment in our Pathways Plan to enlarge our faith by a more expansive engagement with our ever richer and more diverse multicultural context, not least Asian cultures. Firstly however, it is worth reminding ourselves that Christian Faith has always connected to various images and that those such as the good shepherd have evolved in meaning over time. A powerful example, from the early 5th century of the Christian/Common Era, is the Good Shepherd Mosaic in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna in Italy. It illustrates key shifts in Christian history.



The symbol of the cross was always significant, albeit not with the heavy later emphases of personal sin, finitude and transactional metaphysics. However, in early Christian art, as, if not more important, were the symbols of the fish and the shepherd. For these reflected life-giving aspects of nurture, community, feeding and flourishing, which early Christians found in Christ. We see this in the Ravenna mosaic, where the overall style is pastoral and peaceful. Christ is seen evolving with nature, and appears humble and in fruitful relationship with the sheep. Christ is also youthful and clean shaven, contrasting with later more patriarchal and bearded images. Their shepherd's staff is in the form of a cross, not a sceptre, still less a sword. Their posture is also significant. They reach out to the left, symbolizing the Eastern Church. Their eyes are also directed to the right, symbolising the Western Church. Christianity may have been at odds over important theological issues. Yet the artist shows that in Jesus, there is no division between East and West. The whole Church is one body in Christ.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/family/catholic-teens/religious-art/how-jesus-has-been-picturedthroughout-history/>



Such an image is to be found in the earlier Roman catacombs. Yet we also see important changes happening. Instead of being a typical country figure, this Good Shepherd has a large golden halo, a royal purple mantle over a golden tunic. The Judaeian carpenter's son is on their way to becoming the regal Byzantine King of Heaven: now dressed, as one commentator puts it, *'by the ancestors of Armani and Gucci rather than an earlier version of the likes of Kmart.'*<sup>2</sup> Clearly, Christians have always re-presented and re-interpreted the Good Shepherd in different ways. So what we might receive today and how might we picture them ourselves?

The first image I'd like to offer from the range of living Asian spiritualities today is that of the Christ Child as the Bom Pastor (or Good Shepherd), in this carved ivory sculpture from Goa, created around the year 1700. It sits well with the first of our Pathways, that of contemporary Faith, engaging with our world's diverse cultures and other faiths. How does it speak to you? Christ is in a meditative pose with their legs crossed, at the top of a three tiered sacred mountain.

Note how Christ's right hand rests on their cheek whilst their fingers make a sign of peace. A lamb is on Christ's knee and another on their left shoulder. They wear a tunic and sandals, with a gourd-shaped bottle on their belt. The garment is also probably of wool, its hatched pattern matching that of the sheep. The lower section

shows more sheep, drinking birds, a pair of resting tigers, two saintly figures, and a fountain of life, with water flowing from the mouth of a tiger's head. A resting female figure in a grotto and next to a crucifix is at the base.

She rests with her hand on a prayer book, a traditional way in Goa of depicting Mary Magdalene. The sculpture is one of a number of Christian productions made in Goa from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, exported to Europe and probably used by Christian missionaries to engage with local peoples. For the image of the peaceable shepherd would have resonated with Hindus and Buddhists alike. Krishna after all was a cowherd as a child and is often depicted similarly surrounded with animals.



<sup>2</sup> <https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/teaching-resources-for-historians/teaching-and-learning-in-the-digital-age/images-of-power-art-as-an-historiographic-tool/christ-as-the-good-shepherd>

The look of serenity on the Christ's figure's face has also been compared to depictions of the Buddha. Thus we have a beautiful example of how the shepherd figure may encourage conversation with many cultures and wisdom traditions today. <sup>3</sup>



A second image helps us reflect upon Justice in our Pathways Plan. This comes from arguably the greatest Chinese Christian artist of our day, He Qi. Currently a resident of California, He Qi Studied at Nanjing and at Hamburg Art Institute in Germany, is currently an Artist-in-Residence at Fuller Theological Seminary and a Distinguished Visiting Professor at the Art Institute of Renmin University of China, in Beijing. <sup>4</sup> He also received his Honorary Doctor Degree from the Australian Catholic University in Melbourne and received a 20<sup>th</sup>

Century Award for Achievement in recognition of outstanding achievements in the field of Religious Art Theory and Christian Art, and his many art works which have been displayed in museums, galleries, universities and churches across the world.

He Chi was the first among Mainland Chinese to earn a Ph.D. in Religious Art after having spent the years of the Cultural Revolution painting pictures of Mao Tse Tung in the day time as an alternative to forced labour, and in the evening painting pictures of the Madonna inspired by his fascination with Raphael's Madonna and Child. So what do you see in this image of the Good Shepherd and how does it speak to you? I see something of that journey of He Chi, and of the gifts of Chinese and other Asian people who pioneer new pathways and life for us all. Among other features, I therefore see vibrant strength and colour, and a commitment to life, and hospitality for all creation.

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<sup>3</sup> See audio file: [https://soundcloud.com/metmuseum/christ-child-as-the-bompaster?utm\\_source=globalworship.tumblr.com&utm\\_campaign=wtshare&utm\\_medium=widget&utm\\_content=http%253A%252F%252Fsoundcloud.com%252Fmetmuseum%252Fchrist-child-as-the-bom-paster](https://soundcloud.com/metmuseum/christ-child-as-the-bompaster?utm_source=globalworship.tumblr.com&utm_campaign=wtshare&utm_medium=widget&utm_content=http%253A%252F%252Fsoundcloud.com%252Fmetmuseum%252Fchrist-child-as-the-bom-paster)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.heqiart.com/about-he-qi.html>



A third contemporary Asian image for reflection, and not least for our Community Pathway, is this Mandala of the Good Shepherd. What do you see, and what does it say to you? It was created by the Indian artist Dr Jyoti Sahi, who runs an art ashram in Silvepura Village, Karnataka, near Bangalore. Among today's painters of biblical themes, Sahi is one of the most inventive, and, since the 1960s, has developed a visual gospel language contextualized to Indian culture and fostering Hindu-Christian dialogue.<sup>5</sup>



With other Indian Christian artists, Jyoti Sahi has thus used the mandala's form and meditative function.<sup>6</sup> About this mandala, he says:

*The shepherd goes in search of the one lost sheep, which he brings back to the round fold of his ninety-nine sheep. The Shepherd is himself the door of the sheepfold. This door can be related to the eye of the Sun.*

Sahi refers to the All-Seeing Eye of God, which, in ancient religious symbolism, was associated with the Sun, and understood to be like a shepherd, with the clouds and all creation as the sheep. Numerology also features: with eleven times nine making ninety nine, and the twelfth part (the final hour which completes the day) representing the Lord, or Christ, recovering the missing sheep, completing creation.<sup>7</sup>

The fourth image I offer from modern Asian spirituality comes from the Malaysian Christian artist Hanna-Cheriyen Varghese (1938- 2009). Again, it sits well with our Pathways Plan, especially the fourth element of Engagement. What do you see, and how does it speak to you? To me, it is not least an invitation to open our eyes and hearts, our spaces and resources, to the gifts of others, particularly those who do not always find it easy to express their voices. For this painting was completed in 2006 but for many years Hanna Cheriyen Varghese struggled to have the opportunity to paint.



<sup>5</sup> See further, and on Sahi's work on the Resurrection: <https://artandtheology.org/2016/03/30/three-resurrectionpaintings-by-indian-artist-jyoti-sahi/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://globalworship.tumblr.com/post/142767296905/resurrection-art-from-india-jyoti-sahi-mandala>

<sup>7</sup> <http://jyotiartashram.blogspot.com/2007/10/mandala-of-good-shepherd.html>

She started her career as an art and English teacher, but also experienced the demands of being a wife, mother and grandmother. Hanna also worked with different media including oil colours, metal-tooling and wood-block printing. Her passion however was painting with acrylic on canvas and batik-dyeing in fabric. Indeed, she described batik-dyeing as:

*an element of surprise and wonder in dyeing. The colour is deep when the fabric is wet. When it dries it takes on a lighter shade. Finally the result of colour on colour is amazing when a new hue emerges.*<sup>8</sup>

Imagine what might be created, through us with others, if we and others were open to flexibility in modes and means of expression, enabling surprise and wonder to break forth in new divine hues! What kind of a shepherd do you see? What kind of a shepherd is speaking to you at this time? How will you picture Christ in your life? How will we picture Christ together in our lives together?

I leave you with a final image from my country, that marginal but extraordinary land, way up on the roof of England. In medieval times, that land was owned by those known, literally, as Prince Bishops, with real secular and spiritual power. When one bishop was appointed, a notable pamphlet was published by a daring priest. It invited the bishop to



choose between spiritual and pastoral pathways. For, as its title read: *'will you be a shepherd, or a fleecer?'*

We might ask something similar, of ourselves, our Church, and all our secular leaders. Will we be shepherds, in the best sense, or will be fleecers? How we respond to divine love, and live as flourishing pictures, is our own invitation.

In the name of Christ, seen in many guises, and alive among us now in many ways unseen. Amen.<sup>i</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See further and for her online Art Collection at <http://hanna-artwork.com>

<sup>i</sup> This Reflection is part inspired by the Global Christian Worship blog, of Dr. Paul Neeley, from the Robert E. Webber Institute of Christian Worship, and in particular the following post:  
<https://globalworship.tumblr.com/post/142925921135/jesus-as-good-shepherd-in-asian-art>

See also for other recent images: <https://globalworship.tumblr.com/post/142971501190/jesus-as-good-shepherd-in-non-asian-art> Copyright for all images is retained by the artists or their representatives.

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