

“Jesus, Top Gear and Sheep...” I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

One of my favourite series on television over the last few years, in spite of the recent fracas, of which I am sure many of you are aware due to the media exposure, has been Top Gear. Ironically, my enjoyment has not been based so much on the latest news reports on vehicles, but rather the brilliant interplay between three very different main characters, namely Jeremy Clarkson, James May and Richard Hammond. What I didn't enjoy was the occasional blasphemy that somehow the BBC decided to leave unedited. One episode comes to mind, however, when I was doing my sermon preparation this past week. The Top Gear Three land up in the vast outback of Australia testing various vehicles and their tolerance of the harsh climate. (That is both the vehicles and the actors!) One of the tasks set by the anonymous producers was for the Top Gear Three to round up a large number of sheep on a ranch. However, this time, no traditional sheep dogs or horses were to be used, but, yes, you guessed it, cars!

The Bible is indeed full of deep and wonderful metaphors that the Biblical Authors used as a powerful tool in order to convey the kerygmatic vitality of the Old Testament and the Gospels. The Gospels are essentially wonderful sagas that call us to faith through their testimony. What better way to do this than through figures of speech? The Biblical Authors, through the ages were gifted writers, empowered through the Holy Spirit and thus motivated to reach as many people as they could through the Old, Old Story. One of the great metaphors that reoccurs on a regular basis in the complete Bible is the idea of sheep and the shepherd. A bit of research on the internet quickly reveals that in fact the word “sheep” appears at least 500 times in the Bible. Thus the sheep is mentioned more than any other animal. Perhaps we should explore why this metaphor was so widely used by the Biblical Authors.

Sheep were important to the nomads and agricultural life of the Hebrews and similar peoples. On a deeper note it is clear that the metaphor of sheep is actually referring to God's people.

So why would the idea of sheep be used to refer to God's people? Firstly, sheep are precious! They are a vital resource to the people. Not only do they provide nourishment in the form of protein, they also provide wool for clothing and warmth. Sheep are an asset, a possession to be treasured and looked after. They may be used as a means of trade, a symbol of wealth and status. An investment for the future.

How many parallels can we as Christians draw from this idea? We are God's people. 1 Peter 2:9 reminds us, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.”

Jesus also protects us in His loving arms, keeps us warm in His spirit, in the same way that the wool of the sheep keeps us warm, so to do the arms of Jesus keep us warm and safe.

Sheep are what scientists call social animals. They graze and move together as a means of protection from hunting animals. They are known to have a strong flocking or herding and following instinct. This is the only protection they have from predators. Their safety is in numbers.

Here is another symbolic message for us as Christians. We are called to remain together in the Body of Christ, supporting and loving one another so that we can all grow in His light. Acts 20:38 reminds us with the beautiful words, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which He

obtained with His own blood.” Perhaps some of you are thinking that the metaphor of God’s people as sheep is not so great as sheep can also tend to follow the leader when he or she is at fault. You are correct. In 2006, in Eastern Turkey, over 400 sheep died when one sheep tried to cross a 15 meter deep ravine. The first sheep died during the crossing and the rest of the sheep followed. This is a stark reminder to all of our brothers and sisters who are leaders in the church, to be fully aware of the awesome responsibility we all have when leading God’s people. It is not a responsibility to be taken lightly or flippantly. All church leaders are accountable, both to God and the Church!

Perhaps one of the most common extended metaphors we are all familiar with is the idea that sheep are always cared for by a shepherd (not three internal-combustion vehicles as in Top Gear!). This is a powerful metaphor that engenders deep symbolism of fatherly love, care, supervision, oversight and guidance. The idea of Jesus being a shepherd over His flock is a powerful image that goes a long way to explain the relationship between us and our Lord. Jesus is always there for us, guiding, loving, supervising and caring... should we look in the right place and open our hearts to Him.

This concept and metaphor of Jesus looking after His flock needs to be particularly unpacked in the light of recent concerning political events that have taken place in our country over the last few weeks. Sadly, many foreign nationals have lost their lives due to xenophobia. As Arch Bishop Thabo Makgoba reminds us all so pertinently, foreign nationals are also people of God; we are one flock, one people, and one body. I was privileged enough to have tea with Archbishop Thabo yesterday and he said quite definitively to the group I was with that Christianity and Xenophobia do not go together.

Leviticus 19:33-34 reminds us, “When an alien lives with you in your land, do not ill-treat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native born. “

The whole Gospel is a message of love. Love for everyone. I realise that the current political scenario regarding xenophobia in South Africa is both complex and intricate in its solution, if there even is one. What is simple from a Christian point of view is that this practice is unacceptable. We are called to share the love of God with all of our neighbours.

Jesus did.

Jesus showed His love to the Roman soldier who cut off his ear.

He showed His love to a learned scholar and Pharisee like Nicodemus.

He showed His love to a foreign divorcee like the Samaritan woman at the well.

He showed His love to a cheat and a traitor like Zaccheus.

He showed His love to the grotesque and unsightly lepers.

He showed His love to those possessed by demons.

So then, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, should we not also be extending our hand of friendship to those people from across our borders who reside in our country?

Yes, I know, many of you are thinking right now that this doesn’t really apply to me as I am not the one causing the xenophobia. The truth is that as the People of God we also have a

responsibility to make a difference in the Kingdom of God. All of us have a circle of influence, some bigger than others, but we still do have a circle of influence. It thus becomes our direct responsibility, as Christians to ensure that we communicate to as many people as possible that this behaviour is unacceptable and not part of the Kingdom of God. This is assuming responsibility for accountable and correct leadership within the flock of sheep that we live our lives.

The metaphor of Jesus the Shepherd looking after His sheep, His people will always be with us. It is our heritage as Christians. The pain of the people in our country must not always be with us. We are all called as part of His flock to make a real difference in the world, to share His love, to share His caring, to share His supervision and to share His faithfulness.

Never give up hope.

I would like to conclude this morning by reading a passage written by Professor Jonathan Jansen, Rector and Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Free State: My South Africa by Jonathan Jansen

My South Africa is the working-class man who called from the airport to return my wallet without a cent missing. It is the white woman who put all three of her domestic worker's children through the same school that her own child attended. It is the politician in one of our rural provinces, Mpumalanga, who returned his salary to the government as a statement that standing with the poor had to be more than just a few words. It is the teacher who worked after school hours every day during the public sector strike to ensure her children did not miss out on learning.

My South Africa is the first-year university student in Bloemfontein who took all the gifts she received for her birthday and donated them - with the permission of the givers - to a home for children in an Aids village. It is the people hurt by racist acts who find it in their hearts to publicly forgive the perpetrators. It is the group of farmers in Paarl who started a top school for the children of farm workers to ensure they got the best education possible while their parents toiled in the vineyards. It is the farmer's wife in Viljoenskroon who created an education and training centre for the wives of farm labourers so that they could gain the advanced skills required to operate accredited early-learning centres for their own and other children. My South Africa is that little white boy at a decent school in the Eastern Cape who decided to teach the black boys in the community to play cricket, and to fit them all out with the togs required to play the gentleman's game. It is the two black street children in Durban, caught on camera, who put their spare change in the condensed milk tin of a white beggar. It is the Johannesburg pastor who opened up his church as a place of shelter for illegal immigrants. It is the Afrikaner woman from Boksburg who nailed the white guy who shot and killed one of South Africa's greatest freedom fighters outside his home.

My South Africa is the man who went to prison for 27 years and came out embracing his captors, thereby releasing them from their impending misery. It is the activist priest who dived into a crowd of angry people to rescue a woman from a sure necklacing. It is the former police chief who fell to his knees to wash the feet of Mamelodi women whose sons disappeared on his watch; it is the women who forgave him in his act of contrition. It is the Cape Town university psychologist who interviewed the 'Prime Evil' in Pretoria Centre and came away with emotional attachment, even empathy, for the human being who did such terrible things under apartheid.

My South Africa is the quiet, dignified, determined township mother from Langa who straightened her back during the years of oppression and decided that her struggle was to raise decent children, insist that they learn, and ensure that they not succumb to bitterness or defeat

in the face of overwhelming odds. It is the two young girls who walked 20kms to school every day, even through their matric years, and passed well enough to be accepted into university studies. It is the student who takes on three jobs, during the evenings and on weekends, to find ways of paying for his university studies. My South Africa is the teenager in a wheelchair who works in townships serving the poor. It is the pastor of a Kenilworth church whose parishioners were slaughtered, who visits the killers and asks them for forgiveness because he was a beneficiary of apartheid. It is the politician who resigns on conscientious grounds, giving up status and salary because of an objection in principle to a social policy of her political party. It is the young lawman who decides to dedicate his life to representing those who cannot afford to pay for legal services.

My South Africa is not the angry, corrupt, violent country whose deeds fill the front pages of newspapers and the lead-in items on the seven-o'clock news. It is the South Africa often unseen, yet powered by the remarkable lives of ordinary people. It is the citizens who keep the country together through millions of acts of daily kindness.

Never give up hope. You do make a difference. Jesus loved. Jesus died. Jesus lives again. Alleluia.

May God bless you in the week ahead as you reflect upon your role in helping to sustain the sheep of the Shepherd within this beautiful, but flawed country of ours.

Amen.