

4th Sunday of Easter

To those over about 45, when did you last see a new “Western” – a story about the American “wild west” – the Australian equivalent would probably be the “Outback?”

If you have ever watched a Western, you will have noticed that most characters in the film fit into two categories: the pioneers and the settlers. The pioneers are those who never like being tied down, who enjoy new faces and new frontiers, who are happy answering the call of the wild open spaces. Their home is usually a covered wagon and they leave a litany of forwarding addresses in their trail. They always seem to be moving on.....

Then there’s the settlers. They have stopped wandering and now have regular addresses. They’ve put down roots, built their homes and surrounded themselves with familiar faces. They like the settled life and the security that goes with it. When they have to leave home they never stay away too long. They guard their homesteads from marauding wanderers. And usually all the authority figures – the mayor, the sherrif and the judge – are settlers.

You will remember that the first two brothers in the Bible, Cain and Abel, are a settler and a pioneer. Cain is the one who is settled, the farmer who tills the soil and waits on the produce from the land. Abel is the shepherd, the wandering figure who searches out new pastures for his flock. Although they are brothers, the shepherd and the farmer, the pioneer and the settler, they do not relate very well. Cain is jealous because the first-born lambs of the shepherd are accepted by God while his first produce from the land is rejected. He takes Abel to the open country and murders him. The first killing fields. Doomed to be a fugitive Cain soon settles

down again and becomes the builder of the first city. The settler has landed again.

Long before the chosen people settled as farmers, they had wandered from place to place living in tents and leading their animals from one pasture to another. At the time of Christ the shepherd was still an important worker, but he was not looked on with great confidence. The old rivalry between the nomads roaming with their flocks and the settled tillers of the soil was still alive. Shepherds were regarded as an unhappy mixture of gypsy and roaming thief, not least because their flocks sometimes ate their way through private property! Because of the roving demands of their job the shepherds could not honour the demands of the ceremonial law and so were regarded as religious outcasts; and because they were seen as untrustworthy, they were disqualified from appearing as legal witnesses.

The popular, romantic image of the “good” shepherd that many of us have is a world away from the reality. It does not include living on the fringes of civilisation, the harshness and danger of the wilderness, the large loneliness, and the sheer difference of a life which communed more with sheep than with people. The shepherd had a place in the folk-lore of the Israelite people but he had no place of importance in their society at the time of Jesus. Shepherds, donkey drivers, and pedlars were all at the bottom of the social scale.

So when Jesus speaks of himself as the shepherd he is clearly allying himself with the vagabonds of society. Elsewhere he says: “Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” He is the wandering prophet who has been rejected by his own settlement in Nazareth. He keeps moving, always having another address in mind, and he shakes a lot of dust from his feet. He never lingers, even when the people’s

hospitality is generous. He will not be tied down – except when he is taken to Calvary. He is a pioneer rather than a settler.

As the shepherd he is always going ahead of his flock seeking out new pastures. He takes on the risks and dangers of the calling, knowing that there will be a few wolves on the uplands. The authority figures – all of whom are settlers – regard him with undisguised hatred. They will eventually ensure, just as at the beginning, that he is taken into the killing fields and murdered. They will tie him down at last. But he does not settle into death, and the tomb is a temporary stop. Clearly, you cannot keep a pioneer down !

When you think about yourself, do you see yourself as a pioneer or a settler ? Surely the Church is made up of both kinds..... and some people manage to fill both roles – like St. Paul, the tent-maker who was also good at moving on as we hear in today's first reading. And every community in the church, every parish, needs both kinds: people who call the community away from stagnation, and people who build up the community. Every person here has a vocation to do one or the other. For the sake of all of us and for our own community life, let us pray for each other's vocation.