



## *Peter, Paul and Mary – and the Hope of the Lord of our children*

*A message by Rev Michael Birch*

Well friends, it's lovely to be with you this morning. Some of you know I spent most of my ministry out in the bush — wide paddocks, red dust, and sheep who behaved only slightly better than church councils. Only slightly.

I want to take you back to one particular season on the farm when I had three poddy lambs. Now, most ministers have a few unusual things on their CV, but not all can claim to have bottle-fed their sermon illustrations. These three little lambs had been orphaned, so they lived in a cardboard box by the back door, and, as these things go, they needed names.

### **Point 1. 3 Poddy Lambs called Peter, Paul and Mary**

So I called them **Peter, Paul, and Mary**.

Now, that seemed terribly witty to me at the time. Peter was bold — always the first to run to the bottle. Paul was determined — pushed the others aside, rather like the apostle running his race. And Mary... well, Mary was the gentle one. Also the one who always seemed to find her way into my vegetable patch. A saintly name doesn't guarantee saintly behaviour.

But as I fed those lambs, day after day, I found myself thinking about God's deep hope for His children — for our children, our grandchildren, and those yet to come. Out in the quiet paddocks, you get a bit more room to think. And sometimes, if you're lucky, the Lord speaks to you louder than the windmill.

### **Point 2: The God of Hope fills us**

There's a verse that has walked with me through many seasons — Romans 15:13:

*"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."*

I love that word *overflow*. It's not a trickle. It's not a polite drizzle. It's not even the sort of small mercy you get when the rain goes around your property but hits the neighbour's. No — it's an overflow. A cup running over. A dam spilling its banks.

And friends, that's my prayer for our families — that the God of hope would fill us, and fill them, until hope is the thing that sloshes out of their lives. We can't fill our children and grandchildren with hope ourselves — but the Holy Spirit can. We can pray. We can bless them. We can encourage them. And we can trust the Shepherd who loves them even more than we do.

### **Point 3: The Shepherd's Voice**

Jesus said, *"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."* (John 10:27)

Now, back to Peter, Paul and Mary — those lambs knew my voice. They could be halfway across the yard, chewing on something that was definitely not meant to be chewed, and I only had to call out and they'd come running. Mind you, that might have had something to do with the milk bottle in my hand, but I choose to interpret it theologically.

But here's the comfort: our children — even the grown ones, even the ones who've wandered off — are not beyond the reach of the Shepherd's voice. We may worry about them. We may wonder where they're heading. But Jesus knows how to call His sheep home. He knows each one by name. And He never — never — stops speaking hope over them.

So we keep praying. We keep trusting. And sometimes, we keep bottle-feeding the stubborn ones.

### **Point 4: The Hymn of Hope "Praise my Soul the King of Heaven"**

There's an old hymn — one of my favourites —  
*"Praise my soul, the King of heaven."* You know it well:

*Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,  
evermore His praises sing...*

Every time we sang that in church, something in me straightened up. Because that is the story of every person the Shepherd gathers. That's the destiny we pray over our families: that they would be ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven — and one day join us in singing praise to the everlasting King.

Friends, I'm 80 now. I've seen enough seasons come and go to know this: God is faithful. He was faithful when I bottle-fed Peter, Paul and Mary in the cold mornings. He was faithful in the parishes I served, in the families I prayed for, in the heartbreaks and the healings. And He is faithful still, to us and to our children.

So today, may the God of hope fill you — and fill them — with all joy and peace as you trust in Him. And may you overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And if all else fails, remember this: even the most stubborn lamb can find its way home when it hears the Shepherd's voice.

Amen.