

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 4.5-12

1 John 3.16-end

John 10.11-18 - Jesus the Good Shepherd

How do you feel about being compared to a sheep ? It's not a great comparison, is it ? One part of me rather objects to the idea that I'm behaving like a silly, mindless sheep, wandering around aimlessly in life. So why does Jesus use this image ? and why does he compare himself to a shepherd ?

Flocks of sheep and their shepherds meant of course so much more to the world of two thousand years ago (and still do in many parts of the world today). They were an important asset which needed to be protected. So Jesus was referring to something which meant a lot to his listeners. And the shepherd's care for his sheep is a frequent theme in the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke: for example, Jesus has compassion for the crowds who are like sheep without a shepherd, in Matthew 9 and Mark 6; or like sheep who are sent into the midst of wolves, in Matthew 10 and Luke 10; and there is the warning of ravenous wolves who come in sheep's clothing, in Matthew 7, which reminds us of the events in a Sheffield congregation a few years ago, and more recently at a church in Wimbledon.

This sort of talk is grist to the mill of a Dawkins or Hitchens, who do not see a place for God in today's world, where we know everything and can manage everything by ourselves. My own view of them is that they are themselves wandering round like lost sheep, searching for a lasting meaning in their lives and are in fact reaching out to Christians and others of faith to help them find it. I would be interested to hear what you think about that.

In the parable of the one lost sheep in Matthew 18 Jesus describes God's care for all those who might get lost, and in our Gospel passage today from John Jesus is identifying himself as the shepherd, who goes as far as laying down his life for the sheep. So he is no ordinary shepherd. Earlier in John 10 Jesus (who by the way is talking to Pharisees at this point, so to educated Jewish elders) tells them that they are climbing into the sheepfold by a way other than the gate, like thieves and bandits, in order to take the sheep captive. They are not interested in the welfare of the sheep. Only the one who enters the sheepfold by the gate – Jesus who is himself the gate – has a genuine interest in the wellbeing of the sheep and knows them by calling them by name. You remember the words the Bishops use when they are confirming people here in this church and elsewhere: "God has called you by name and made you his own".

Jesus refers to himself in verse 14 as the good shepherd, directly comparing himself with a hired hand for whom it is just a job. It is the good shepherd who is prepared to lay down his life for the sheep, and who does exactly that, in order (as he says in verse 18) to "take it up again" in his resurrected self and in the Holy Spirit – his eternal gift to us.

But why? Why go to such lengths? Even though we think we have progressed in so many ways and know so much more about how our world works, yet still we are liable to go astray: we think and say and do stupid things, we allow others to live in poverty, or to be sent unjustly to prison, we even commit terrible crimes ourselves. The mystery of God's creation is that he has given us all free will, but it also means that we are free to worship and love him. He welcomes us whoever we are, without restriction or distinction. In our Gospel passage Jesus is talking to Jews, but he refers in verse 16 to ".....other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd". In this way we know that we too are

included in God's vision for humankind, because we are all created in his image – the image which is characterised by love.

With my 21st century hat on I could say that comparing modern-day, sophisticated human beings to sheep is ridiculous; but when we stop to think about all our repeated sins and failings, the comparison begins to seem uncomfortably accurate and all our skill and knowledge seem like so much rubbish. As Isaiah said “all we like sheep have gone astray”. Indeed we have, but let's welcome the open, forgiving hands of God and his shepherd son Jesus Christ, who offers himself as the gate into the safe pasture we all crave.

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