

EASTER 4 THE GOOD SHEPHERD

"I know my sheep and they follow me. No one will snatch them out of my hand." John 10. 22-30

You have heard the BBC's Frank Muir story. He arrived at a Cotswold church as the pall bearers carried out the casket to "*And sheep shall safely graze.*" He asked a bearer why "*Sheep shall?..*" An answer was hissed "*We're burying the butcher.*"

In Jesus' day, the shepherd led the way to sheep's heaven, sweet, anxiety-free pasture. The shepherd lived with the sheep day and night; s/he knew the sheep's every mannerism and peculiar trait and was lovingly concerned with their care and welfare. The shepherd called every sheep by name and it followed. The sheep knew the shepherd's voice. Whole flocks of woolly jumpers could be disentangled instantly from being intermingled with hairy goats, the purl from the plain, merely at the sound of a familiar voice. Can you imagine the image of a good shepherd that Jesus was adumbrating in himself? Jesus called to Matthew in the tax-office and to the fisher-folk at the sea-side, "*Follow me! I will make you fishers of men*" (Matt. 4.19) He re-named Simon. "*You are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church...*" (Matthew 16.18) In the Garden of Eden story, Adam shepherded the animals and gave them names. Jesus, the Second Adam, becomes the one who *calls the sheep by name*. Moses was a shepherd for forty years defending his sheep from enemy attack; Saul and David were shepherds before began to shepherd the Nation. The Good Shepherd wants us to hear his voice and find the faith to carry us through times of fear just like a shepherd protects his flock in time of trouble. He wants us to hear his words of peace and comfort for our lives. This is the gift of eternal life, living as in eternity realized here and now. It does not begin at death, but at the time when we become one of his sheep, when God regenerates our hearts and turns us into followers of Jesus. Alas! Sometimes we make it difficult to hear, because we are distracted by the rush and bustle of this modern world. We have too many commitments and interruptions; we become tense and nervy. We may even choke down our food while snapping irritably at our family.

By night, having made a branches-pen-fold or having counted the sheep into a village fold, the shepherd found one sheep was missing. Head down, the sheep had followed a succulent line of sweet grass. When it looked up, it had strayed and its fellows were nowhere to be seen. The shepherd would retrace his/her steps in a far-seeing search, listening for the plaintive bleating of the panicked beast. It was not the sheep with the woolliest coat, nor the one with the best breeding potential; it was simply the one that was lost. For this one sheep, the shepherd would brave cold, falls and injury in the darkness. He needed infinite patience, endurance, constant watchfulness and superb patience. Is this a picture of Jesus? The sacrificial action of the shepherd alone saved the sheep. At the cost of his life, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, sought out the scraggy, unlovable sheep, the black sheep. There was Zacchaeus, the pint-sized hated tax-collector, the Gadarene demoniac, the woman with six husbands and always the lepers.

The found sheep may be frazzled, frozen with fear, its wool wet, heavy and stinking. The shepherd may have to tie a rope around his body and lower himself to where the paralyzed animal was, and then have to shoulder it and carry it out of the jaws of certain death. If it was scratched or injured, the shepherd would anoint it with healing oil: *"My head you have anointed with oil..."* (Psalm 23.5) The sheep was community property. The village would wait up, unsleeping for the homecoming of the shepherd and the very valuable sheep. If carrying home the sheep safely, a joyful shout of thanks would sound. How like this example is our community-parish? A modern example of this affection for animals was seen in the 2001 British dreaded foot and mouth pandemic. Whole flocks and herds of animals were torched; the heart-break of losing the seasons upon seasons of breeding was inconsolable; everything that farming generations had lived for was gone. The image of the flock is an image of the human community. All of us have a deep instinct and need for community as a place for encouraging mutual support and companionship. Jesus called together a church-flock. We cannot belong to Jesus without belonging to his flock.

If overnighing out on the range, the good shepherd would lie down across the pen-fold opening as a door to stop any intruding wild beast coming in and any sheep going out. Good Shepherd Jesus came to lay down his life for his sheep, to save them from the ravaging jaws of the devouring wolves of sin. John recorded Jesus' words *"I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord."* (John 10. 17-18) Jesus' promise is to those who belong to him that no one will be lost, for *"no one will snatch them from out of my hand."* (John 10.28)

Defenceless sheep needed a protector by night and a leader to guide to green pasture by day, one with whom they may develop a personal relationship, one in whom they feel secure. Our Good Shepherd offers us the pasture of eternal life, realized here and now, if we offer ourselves into his protective hands. He says, *"I know my sheep and they follow me."* Today, with both family partners tired out from working perhaps to finance their mega-mansions, (a case of *bricks before babies* and not *babies before bricks*,) do they really know their children? And do children infrequently not know their parents' loving shepherd-voice, let alone being formed in a religious tradition by them? Physically, our lambs are perfectly unblemished; intellectually, they are brilliant, but spiritually, they may be rootlessly pagan. When young people stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing; they fall for anything.

There are clever wolves, subversive wolves, amoral wolves, waiting to snatch out of a shepherd's hand, who operate a cunning subterfuge in media, pack-prowling to devour the flock-family, especially God's once-thought un-snatchable lambs. We must be vigilant gate-keepers to help them stand on shifting sand.

We are but older children. There should not be Jimmy Woodser-Christians in our parish. We must let others know us intimately, know our true feelings, needs, hurts, hopes and fears.

How many of us defer seeking the love of another Christian? How many of us live and die never having been deeply known and loved?

Psalms 23 has the phrase "*He makes me lie down in green pastures.*" Sometimes, something in our silly sheep's character causes us to miss the right life, to trot right on through the God-provided tempting, grassy meadow. Something in our unpredictable sheepiness causes me to push myself past the place of pause for boundless blessings, so I miss the comforting words of my family or parish colleagues. Deaf to the Good Shepherd calling, I am awake to my success through my efforts alone. So, the Good Shepherd in love "*makes me lie down,*" orchestrates it so that I am forced to stop, to receive tender care from others and to enjoy rest in him; "*Near restful waters he leads me to revive my drooping spirit.*" Sometimes, the Good Shepherd speaks, but we're sick of his GPS (Godly Positioning System) interrupting us with words of pardon and peace. So, we hit the *mute* button. The GPS goes on working, but we will surely end up lost, because we chose to go our way.

We may choose to have *selective hearing*; we hear only what we want to hear and centre our hearing on the world and not on the direction and guidance of the Good Shepherd. We think we know better than the Good Shepherd. Your Vicar loves to watch those imported home improvement shows, where a couple receive professional advice on how best to make a pig sty into a ritzy apartment. Invariably and frustratingly, to the expert, they decide to go their own novice way, choosing features which will keep the building aptly as a pig's breakfast. People can be like this when offered professional soul advice by the Good Shepherd who wants us to move out from our comfort zone, to change our old opinions, our time-worn pet nostrums, "*Turn back the boats! Go back where you came from!*" The Good Shepherd urges us to see the power of possibility, of love-filled thinking. To do this, we must tune in and not tune out. We cannot be like St. Augustine entering a den of vice, murmuring to his God, "Make me pure, but not just yet."

Peter the Rock that powdered, was called by Jesus, "Simon, son of John," until forgiven his disastrous collapse. When pardoned and restored to leadership, he was told "Feed my lambs." Beset as I am with my past 'might-have-beens,' and 'if onlys,' the Shepherd calls me weekly to a comforting Communion, to a place to be blessed, restored, renewed. In the midst of my troubles, he sups with me. We come to Communion to affirm that there is no better way than to follow the Shepherd of souls, for he is the Way, the Truth and the Life. We come to be gathered into nourishing, life-giving *fellowship* (and, since English does not have a feminine form, *womanship*.) We come sometimes frightened from our self-chosen isolation, to receive the Word, the Wafer and the Wine. Then, as apprentice Good Shepherds or as Com/panions (cum=with/ panis=bread, thus *bread-sharers*), we take its power out to other needy, self-sufficient sheep, who know not the Shepherd's voice, to sheep outside St. George's, lost in the mist, and who are waiting to be found.

Lastly, in sickness, in frailty of advanced age, or at life's ending, I know through Psalm 23 "*The Lord is my shepherd...There is nothing I shall want...My head you have anointed with oil*

and my cup is overflowing... Though I walk through the valley of the Shadow of Death, no evil will I fear..." In life, the Good Shepherd will take me by the hand to lead us through the dark dales of depression, discouragement and failure and God's blessed assurance is that we will never be left alone. At life's ending, taking us by the hand, he will lead us safe home through the last of life's challenges, the darkest of all valleys, even death, to find and to enjoy the greener pastures of the blessings of eternal life. The Good Shepherd leads in front, the twin angels of *"goodness and mercy follow me"* at my back. (Psalm 23.6) I will come out of the valley to emerge into the broad sunlit uplands where *"my dwelling place shall be."* I may know the Shepherd's Psalm; it is better to know the Shepherd.