

Shepherds, Sheep and Hirelings

Epistle: Acts 4:5-12
Gospel: John 10:11-18

Easter 4

Today's gospel is one of my favourite passages, and not only because I have been a shepherd myself and know something about awkward sheep and patient shepherds. The image of shepherds runs through the entire Biblical narrative. Most of us can't remember a time when we didn't know the 23rd psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters". Leaders are often thought of in shepherding terms – that is, after all where the word pastor comes from. The patriarchs Abraham and Jacob were shepherds, as were Moses and David, who who also became leaders of God's people.

A good shepherd knows all of her sheep, knows which ones are gentle, which make the best mothers, which are cantankerous, and which are most likely to escape, or get trapped in a ditch, or do something equally silly. The shepherd is also prepared to go out in all weathers to deliver lambs, to find the one which has gone astray, to fight off predators and to care for the sick or the wounded.

Many people tend to think of sheep as useful sources of wool and meat, but in themselves stubborn and stupid, easily startled and prone to wandering off and falling prey to wolves. However, anyone who has kept sheep knows this is unfair. Sheep are clever enough to know and trust their shepherd, and to follow where she leads. A stranger walking through a flock of sheep will cause pandemonium, while the shepherd won't startle a single one. Moreover, sheep and their shepherd develop a common language. The sheep can interpret the different sounds and calls the shepherd makes, while the shepherd learns to understand all the different sheep's bleats: "I'm hungry"; "I'm sick", or "I'm lost".

"I am the Good shepherd", Jesus says, "I know my own and my own know me ... and I lay down my life for the sheep". It can sometimes be hard to put ourselves in this picture. Today's culture tends to stress individual freedom and self reliance. It can go against the grain to think that we have a shepherd who knows and cares for us, who calls each of us by name, who will make us lie down in green pastures and lead us beside still waters.

In calling himself the good shepherd, Jesus uses the Greek word *kalos*. This word is most often translated as "good", but is best understood as good in the sense of "model"; if you like, a model which we are invited to follow. Jesus calls us sheep, but he also calls us to be shepherds. We are challenged not only to follow his voice, but to become like him. This is quite a challenge, but it's an inspiring one that makes life worth living. He calls us to help heal a broken

world, full of hungry helpless sheep. And there are times when we ourselves are some of those sheep.

Another interesting thing about sheep is that they can recognise individuals, both human and those of their own kind. They can also distinguish something about the emotional state of their neighbours – such as pain, illness or fear. But apart from their own lambs, which ewes will defend with their own lives, when one of their neighbours gets into difficulties, they may look up, but then simply carry on grazing.

Human sheep can be similarly indifferent, missing or turning a blind eye to our neighbours needs or suffering. I'd like to think that we are less inclined to do this with near neighbours – over the past difficult year there has been a great deal of care shown between neighbours, particularly towards those who are isolated, vulnerable or simply overwhelmed by their situations. But on a larger scale there has been terrible polarisation, as the wealthier nations or communities keep filling barns with vaccines and other forms of aid, while the hungry sit on the side-lines.

Healing, for all sorts and conditions of sheep, the thin and the well fed, the bleating and the boasting, comes from being gathered into one flock. Jesus says he has other sheep who are not yet part of the fold, but he is working on this through his band of sheep-shepherds. Our overall health depends on the health of all the other sheep, the white, black or spotted, the horned or the bald ones, the pregnant ewes, the lambs and the rams. As God's people we are both sheep and shepherds, called to join with the Good Shepherd as he leads by still waters and green pastures caring for the entire flock until there are no more enemies, hungry or sick.

And what of the hired hand? He is presented as fearful and careless. Granted, there are many such people who are trying to lead with little care for the sheep's well-being. But as I've been a hired hand for much of my life, as field assistant and technician, teacher, lecturer, and now lay reader, I'm not entirely happy with what seems a blanket condemnation. I've never owned a business or run a department or been an executive anything. And yet I'd like to think that I've done some good and faithful work.

In the scene from Acts, which we heard earlier, Peter and John find themselves in trouble for doing just that. Having recently healed a man who had been lame from birth, they are brought before the authorities and asked, "By what power or by what name did you do this"? To which Peter answers, "By the name of Jesus". He and the other apostles have set about preaching and healing, but always in the name of Jesus. So it could be said that they, and at times we are in a sense, hired hands for Jesus.

Perhaps the point is that we are not simply hired - we are, each of us called by name. Also, although we are often inclined to scatter at the first sign of the wolf, or simply wander off into greener pastures, Jesus never fires us. He continues to care for us with an endless supply of second chances, always ready to make things new.

Hopefully, we are not simply working for money or other earthly rewards, but we also don't have the same overall responsibility that the Good Shepherd does. In fact, it's just when we begin to think we do, when we behave as if we are the owners of God's mission rather than his missionaries, that we find ourselves in trouble.

As disciples of Jesus we are called to be both sheep and shepherd, following his lead, speaking truth, working for justice and healing, willing to take risks in the world – but as we do so, always pointing towards the one we are working for, the Good Shepherd who calls us by name and sets us on the right path.

Amen

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