

MEANT TO BE SHEEP?

APRIL 13, 2008

On this Sunday, which in the Christian Liturgical Calendar is known as the Fourth Sunday of Easter, our readings all point to the image of God as the Shepherd of his creation. Few images are as familiar to us as this one which we have been taught since our childhood. Is there anything new we can glean from examining it once again?

Most of us in Canada including those of us who were farm kids have not been that close to sheep. The Canadian climate is not naturally conducive to raising sheep. The lambing season often arrives when our weather is most brutal making losses too high for any profitability.

As a visitor to Australia and New Zealand this winter, I was struck again by how wonderful were the pastoral scenes of sheep on a hillside. Neither country has the number of sheep today when wool is not in as much demand as it was in decades past. New Zealand, a country which has just celebrated reaching a population of four million, still is a centre for sheep raised for the meat. There was a time when New Zealand had over one million sheep and a small population of humans. Now the flocks of sheep are smaller though this industry is still a key part of the economy.

When in the State of Victoria in southern Australia, I located a sheep ranch some miles from Melbourne. Neighbours in Belleville who look after my house for me when I am away, made me aware of a woman named Clare Adams who had been a famous silent film star in Hollywood starring in over 30 feature films. This woman, born in Winnipeg, was an aunt of my neighbour. She had fallen in love with an Australian and moved to his family's ranch. Farmers in Australia who have large acreages of agricultural land are called pastoralists. So, she married a prominent pastoralist who owned 10,000 acres of land.

Arriving in the 1930's, she transformed the old ranch house into a Hollywood style home. When she died in the 1980's, she willed the place and all contents to the National Trust of Australia. This gift included the land she had developed as a sanctuary for an animal called the Bandicoot. Another area she had developed as a sanctuary for old plants which were disappearing elsewhere.

The property today is 4000 acres. The number of sheep on this ranch is 4000, down from the original 10,000 sheep. It was fascinating to visit the sheep shearing sheds and to get a glimpse of what raising sheep is all about. In that drier part of Australia, as a rule of thumb, you can raise one sheep per acre of available grass land.

The passages we read this morning from scripture were written in a land where the terrain was very different. The Middle East is very hilly with stone laced soil. Land is at a premium and the sheep have to be raised in the midst of many activities just on the outskirts of heavily populated areas. Land was not fenced as it is today in Australia. Therefore, you had to provide someone to guide and protect the sheep. This person was known as a shepherd, someone whose job it was to ensure the sheep moved to the right areas at the right time in order to have food available.

References to sheep and goats in the Bible occur more than five hundred times. The sheep had been early domesticated in Palestine. Sheep represented the chief wealth and the livelihood of a pastoral people. Sheep and goats provided the people with food to eat, milk to drink, wool for the weaving of cloth as well as rough outer garments and materials for tents.

Sheep served as an early medium of exchange and were central in the sacrificial system being offered as burnt offering, a sin offering, a guilt offering or a peace offering.

People viewed sheep as affectionate, unaggressive, relatively defenseless and in constant need of care and supervision.

So with this picture of the sheep and the relationship to the shepherd, it is not surprising that this relationship appears in so many biblical stories and/or examples of human life and experience. The Israelites were a pastoral people and they took their examples from the life around them.

Jeremiah, that great prophet, when he was thinking about God re-creating the people of Israel after they came back from exile, said these words of God: “ I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold... I will set up shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, says God.”

Isaiah had this great picture of God in the role of the shepherd: “he will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.” Handel in his great work Messiah, used these words in a powerful song of certainty and praise.

We read or sang the 23rd Psalm today in our worship. This wonderful psalm most of us can recite from memory. We hear it at many funerals or memorial services as it is comforting and inclusive. It is a great picture of God as the great shepherd of his people. It is a brief Psalm, but one which speaks words of comfort to our very souls.

Note that the Psalmist does not view men and women as dumb sheep who merely follow orders. Rather, this is a picture of an active and interactive relationship between humans and God, all within the safety of God’s overview.

The Psalmist starts off with the assertion that because God is the shepherd, we will not want for anything. God the sustainer and creator of life knows our needs and indeed knows more than we do what are our real necessities. God restores us, renews our energy and faith and leads us to right ways, righteousness the word used for what we can achieve with God.

This active, interested God gives courage as we walk through troubles and death and comforts us as he walks with us and never abandons us. I am no longer afraid as God is beside me leading me to safe places. God blesses us as we walk through the long years of life. In all these blessings, we see the hand of God. In response, I wish and indeed intend, to live with God forever.

In the New Testament, the figure of the shepherd and the sheep finds in the Christian faith its most profound application in Christ as the Good Shepherd of all sheep. This is boldly articulated in the closing benediction of the Book of Hebrews in the simple phrase “our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep.”

The shepherd/sheep relationship between Christ and men and women is briefly but powerfully expressed again in Mark 6:34, when Jesus “saw a great throng, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.”

In our lesson from the First Letter to Peter, we have a passage where Peter speaks of Christ as the sacrifice for us all. Like a sheep being sacrificed, Jesus took all our sin upon himself and willingly sacrificed himself for our redemption. As a result of this act, claims Peter, we who were straying like lost sheep have returned to God, the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls.

This passage illustrates the belief that God took on the dual role of Shepherd and sheep in his incarnation in the person of Jesus Christ.

This illustrated to the early church that God understood that the role of a sheep to the shepherd was not a neutral, bland relationship, but an active and positive relationship with active interaction between shepherd and sheep.

Our St. John’s Gospel reading today speaks further about the shepherd. Jesus tells this story: If a man has to climb over the wall which protects the sheep at night to get to the sheep, then he is obviously not the shepherd but a thief and a robber. The shepherd comes in through the gate and all the sheep recognize him and are content and at ease. Again, when the sheep hear the shepherd’s voice, they follow. When it is a strange voice, they will not move unless frightened and on the run.

Finally Jesus says that he is the gate to the sheep. This was a common occurrence as the sheep were kept at night often tightly together within a circular low wall. There was no gate, lock or key. Instead, the shepherd himself slept across the opening to ensure no one came in or out without his knowledge of it.

So Jesus said he was the gate to the sheep. Because he is the door, he said, if anyone enters by me (not sneaking over the wall), he will be saved. He will be safe and welcomed into the fellowship of the flock. As a good shepherd would give his life to save his sheep, so Jesus would also. We know that he did just that very soon after these passages. He indicated he would do so willingly and of his own accord. He would not be forced, but would die willingly for his sheep.

I find it interesting that people often take these stories literally, in so far as they believe the sheep have no control of what they do. They are viewed as robots, doing only what is permitted by the shepherd. Jesus claims that the sheep still have to learn to trust the shepherd, to have faith in his role and to willingly be together with others in the flock. When one runs away for whatever reason becomes lost, Jesus claims that the good shepherd secures the 99 who are safely in the fold and goes out to find the one that is lost. This presupposes an active relationship between shepherd and sheep rather than a static, robotic relationship.

Over the years sheep have taken on some negative stereotyping. We ourselves have said to our children when they have followed someone and got into trouble: “What is wrong with you? Are you a sheep just blindly following whomever? Use your head, make your own decisions about your behaviour and what you do or do not do.”

I titled this sermon MEANT TO BE SHEEP? We ask the question – what kind of sheep do we want to be? Do we just follow whatever is happening, no control over our lives? Or do we take charge of our actions, do we seek and learn for ourselves, have we discovered the goodness of God for ourselves? Have we made our decision to follow the Good Shepherd we know to be God in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ?

We are sheep by choice, not by force and coercion. When we give our life to God, we know our submission to him is not slavery but rather the freedom to be in a close relationship with the Creator God.

Are we meant to be sheep? No, if we use the negative picture of sheep as helpless followers of the shepherd. Yes, if we have chosen to respond positively to the shepherd who promises to be with us no matter what occurs in life, a shepherd who will never abandon us.

Thanks be to God for his love. Thanks be to God for his courage to stick with us, believe in us. Thanks be to God for always calling us to further service and love. Amen.

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