

## THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Those of you who have read my short biography in this month's edition of 'Outlook' know that I was fortunate to spend the first 10 years of my life growing up on a Northamptonshire farm. Many images from that time remain with me but perhaps the most vivid is sitting in front of an open fire cradling a young orphan lamb in my arms as we fed it warm milk from a baby's bottle.

Some years ago, my mother told me a story of how my stepfather and she were walking along the river Aeron between Aberaeron and Lampeter in Wales when they came across a lone lamb in a field standing next to the body of its dead mother. They managed to pick the lamb up and take it to a nearby National Trust property which contacted the local farmer. My mother remembered her shock at how roughly the farmer seemed to pick up the lamb by its front legs and swing it into the back of his pick-up truck.

We tend to have this image, don't we, of idyllic rural life when we think of shepherding, of ruddy-faced young men lounging in fields with their girlfriends, nursing a jug of cider whilst the sheep graze safely in the background. You know, the sort of thing that we might see in a pre-Raphaelite painting, or picture as we listen to Beethoven's 'Pastoral' Symphony. Perhaps this image is reinforced by the words of Psalm 23 of the Lord as our shepherd leading us in green pastures and by quiet waters. Or, indeed, the prophet Ezekiel chapter 34 which describes the Lord as a good shepherd leading his sheep "back to the mountains and the streams of Israel" and feeding them "in pleasant pastures".

A closer examination, however, reveals a somewhat starker image of the shepherd portrayed in the Bible. Chapter 34 of Ezekiel also portrays a shepherd who will sit in judgment over the sheep. This shepherd will separate the good from the bad and punish those who trample down the grass that they don't eat or muddy the clear water that they do not drink. He will judge between the strong sheep and the weak sheep, punishing those who "pushed the sick ones aside and butted them away from the flock". The book of Ecclesiastes (12:11) tells us that "the sayings of the wise are like the sharp sticks that shepherds use to guide sheep". And Psalm 80 gives us the image of the Shepherd of Israel seated on his throne above the winged creatures.

So, we have from these passages the not so cosy image of the shepherd as a figure of great authority, someone who has a terrible strength. More like the farmer who picks up the lamb by its front legs and swings it into the truck.

It seems to me that these two differing images of the shepherd have much value as we struggle to fathom the mystery of the person of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, who is willing to die for the sheep. On the one hand, as we do now, we look to him for security and protection, for our everyday needs. And then there is the God of power who sits in authority over us, who will come to us as judge, who demands our awe and wonder, and whom, in some sense, we ought to fear.

This is the idea of God that I am sure C.S. Lewis had in mind when portraying the character of Aslan the lion in the Chronicles of Narnia. I am sure that you know that Aslan is a representation of Jesus Christ who is sacrificed in 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe' but who comes to life again to save the land of Narnia from the domination of the evil White Witch. Consider, if you will, this depiction of the lion from that very book as he is about to put things right:

**“And Aslan stood up and when he opened his mouth to roar his face became so terrible that they did not dare to look at it. And they saw all the trees in front of him bend before the blast of his roaring as grass bends in the meadow before the wind”.**

This is the same God who demands that Moses takes off his shoes on Mt Sinai as he is standing on holy ground. The same God whose name is so holy that Moses can only be told from the Burning Bush that “I am who I am” is speaking to him, a phrase which, of course, Jesus himself echoes in John’s Gospel in his “I am” sayings, of which “I am the Good Shepherd” is only one.

What, then, do we mean when we speak of fearing God? Perhaps another example from the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe might shed some light on this. When asking the Beavers about the personality of Aslan before they get to meet him, Lucy, the youngest of the four children in the story, says:

**“Then he isn’t safe?’ said Lucy.**

**‘Safe?’ said Mr Beaver... ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.’” *(Repeat)***

Fearing God, it seems, implies according respect to Him in whose presence we can feel both safe and unsafe, whose face we ask to shine upon us but also upon which we do not dare to look, and there is an appropriate time for each. God knows that at the moment we need to feel safe in His presence and that the light of His countenance needs to fall upon us.

As Christians, not only do we believe in a God who has rejected the notion of safety, but we are called to follow his example, to “take up our cross” daily. If Jesus Christ had taken the “safe” option, he would have given into Satan’s temptations both in the wilderness and in the garden of Gethsemane and substituted agonising death for worldly power and acclaim. And yet he is the Good Shepherd who is willing to die for the sheep. He is the Good Shepherd who, unlike Satan, the hireling, does not abandon His sheep the moment the wolf comes along.

If we are to follow his example, we must also from time to time be prepared to reject the easy option and acknowledge that life is rarely full of green pastures and quiet waters, especially now. Rather, there are occasions when we should be asking Jesus, the Good Shepherd, to pick us up by our legs and throw us into the back of the truck. For any farmer who does that to his lambs is not being cruel, merely giving his flock a lesson that it is not always in their best interests for survival to be treated gently.

Being a Christian demands toughness and it is this toughness and rough treatment that John Donne knew he had to ask for in the fourth of his holy sonnets:

**Batter my heart, three-personed God, for you  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise and stand, o’erthrow me and bend  
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.**

Why would we ask God to batter our hearts? Why do we say in this service during Lent the words of the Psalmist, “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit”? Many people’s spirits are broken right now, we all know that it’s been a terrible year.

**Remember Jesus' words in Matthew chapter 7:**

**But the gate to life is narrow and the way that leads to it is hard.**

**The American poet, Robert Frost alluded to this idea in his poem, 'The Road Not Taken':**

**Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.**

**Jesus Christ will bring us healing and hope, He will restore our loss and bring us to green pastures and quiet waters. As with the Japanese artform of Kintsugi, he will take the broken pieces of our lives and make them new with gold. He has not achieved this by following the safe or easy road but has rather entered through the narrow gate and taken the road less traveled. These are the narrow, rocky, and dangerous pathways that the shepherd must first bring us safely through, as Brian told us last week. These are the roads that we are called to travel. But we do not travel them alone, tough as it may be at times to discern God's presence with us. My brothers and sisters let us pray that He will give us the strength to tread that path too, and the faith to acknowledge that He is travelling with us and will bring us safely to the other side. Better times are coming if we can but bear the present courageously. Amen.**