

## Sheep, shepherds and lambs

21 4 13

Almighty God,  
whose Son, Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life:  
raise us, who trust in him,  
from the death of sin to the life of righteousness,  
that we may seek the things that are above,  
where he reigns with you  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever.

Our text today is the opening verse of Psalm 23: **'The Lord is my shepherd.'**

One of the best known and best loved psalms must surely be Psalm 23 with its familiar image of God as the good shepherd and of us as his cherished sheep. For any image to be effective, it has to be rooted in our imagination through our experience. As such sheep and shepherds would have been familiar to Jews who had begun life as a nomadic folk wandering round the Middle East herding their livestock not least their sheep. Flocks of sheep would have been a familiar sight in the countryside here in Western Europe before the Agrarian and Industrial Revolutions. And even for me growing up in the East End of London in the 1950s, we all knew what sheep and lambs were even if it was only through the fact of our Sunday roast with mint sauce!

Today, three of our four Bible readings touch on shepherds and sheep: Psalm 23 from which our text is taken; Revelation 7 with its vision of heaven; John 10 with its image of the sheep recognising their shepherd's voice.

Psalm 23 is a much loved text, a favourite at funerals and weddings because it paints an optimistic picture of us being cherished by God. As his sheep, we want for nothing: well fed; well watered; protected from danger and fear. Okay, there is the shadow of the valley of death but we are not alone or go unprotected and ultimately we **'will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever'**.

John 10 picks up on this image of a positive relationship between shepherd and sheep. We his sheep recognise the voice of our shepherd. Our relationship is based on a confident familiarity where we know and trust the one who leads us. But the context of the passage is about acceptance and rejection of the shepherd. It is set in the cold of mid winter around at the time of the feast of Hanukkah, the feast when the Temple was rededicated, reconsecrated to God having been desecrated by Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century BC. Jesus is walking around the colonnades in the Court of the Gentiles being questioned by what seems and feels like a hostile audience who demand to know whether or not he is the Messiah. Jesus turns the question back on them by saying they already have the evidence of their eyes and ears, hearing and seeing what he has done. Then he hits them with the image of the voice of a shepherd only being recognised, accepted and obeyed by the sheep who are part of his flock – ouch, not nice at least for those Jews who choose to reject the good shepherd, Jesus.

Revelation 7 offers us an image of heaven, the unnumbered crowd of witnesses worshipping before the throne of God and it concludes with the familiar image of the people of God like sheep being guided 'to springs of the water of life'. But what is extraordinary and exciting is that our shepherd is now the Lamb. In a curious richness of imagery, the Good Shepherd has become the Lamb of God. How can this be ? The image is rooted in the Jewish Passover, with the sacrifice of a lamb whose blood delivers the Children of Israel from the angel of death who passes over their homes without touching the God's Chosen People. The cross and Jesus death on it has now come to be seen as a reworking of that image whereby the Son of God becomes the Lamb of God. By laying down his life for his flock, the Good Shepherd, Jesus, is also the Lamb of God. I love it; don't you ?

So this morning we have the image of a shepherd, his sheep and the Lamb. It is encouraging to know just how cherished we are as God's flock, so cherished in fact that our shepherd is prepared to die for us by becoming the Lamb of God by whose blood we are saved.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,  
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist*

*St Bartholomew's, Dinard*

*21<sup>st</sup> April, 2013*

G: Sermon 27 : Sheep

