

Reflection online on 8 May 2022

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(Readings: Psalm 23 and John 10:22-30)

Don't be afraid to be a sheep



Did you know that sheep and lambs are referenced over 500 times in the Bible (depending which translation you read)? They are mentioned more than any other animal.

The reason for this is that sheep were important to the nomadic people of Biblical times and to agricultural life of the Hebrews. And secondly, sheep are used throughout the Bible as a symbol of God's people and of sacrifice.

The very first shepherd was Abel. In Genesis (4. 3-4) we hear how Cain worked on the land and Abel kept flocks of sheep. In the course of time, Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock, implying that his gifts were worth more.

Abraham and Moses were shepherds. King David was the best-known shepherd in Bible history. He wrote Psalm 23 - *The Lord is my*

shepherd. Shepherds were the first people to see the new-born Jesus Christ.

In early Tudor times, the wool trade in England was the foundation of a very prosperous national economy, which is why the Speaker of the House of Lords sits on a woolsack. Sheep were valuable.

In more recent culture, sheep get a bad press for being stupid. In George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the sheep are depicted as very simple-minded, echoing any propaganda thrown at them. Instead of thinking for themselves, they just repeat slogans over and over: '*Four legs good, two legs bad*', that sort of thing.

I think that this is very unfair on sheep. They have a lot more skills and intelligence than most people realise.

They have amazing vision because their pupils are rectangular, which allows them a wide field of sight, up to 320 degrees. This means that sheep can see almost everything around them, except for what's directly behind them, without having to turn their heads. Very clever.

Sheep are more intelligent than you think. It's been proven that they are able to navigate out of a maze and respond to training just like dogs.

They have shown the ability to recognise at least 50 individual faces for more than two years. They can distinguish different facial expressions and prefer a smile to a frown. And, believe it or not, sheep are capable of experiencing a wide range of emotions, just as humans do. Studies have highlighted the ability of sheep to feel afraid, angry, bored, sad, and happy.

So, if I died and had to come back as an animal, I wouldn't mind being a sheep. I would have a woolly coat to keep me warm in winter and I would have lots of friends. Also, I am likely to have a strong leader.

The Bible describes close relationships between shepherds and their flocks. The shepherd protects his flock and would give his life for his sheep.

In today's gospel, we hear Jesus describing himself as a shepherd, telling the non-believing Jews that they are not part of his flock. He says of his followers: *'My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me'*.

In Matthew's gospel we hear the parable of the lost sheep: *'If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the missing lamb?'*

What a comforting thought. Don't we all want somebody to call to us, to find us, to lovingly embrace us and tell us things are going to be okay? Of course we do.

Incidentally, when John refers to *'the Jews'*, it is not Jewish people at large who oppose Jesus, but Jewish leaders - Pharisees in particular - people with power and prestige to protect.

Common people find it easier to believe in Jesus. It's true, the more sophisticated, wealthy, or powerful we become, the more obstacles we encounter on the road to faith. Jesus turns upside down the lives of those who would follow him. Those who *'have it made'* are less willing to allow Jesus to disturb their comfortable world.

And this is probably the most important hidden message in today's gospel.

The followers of Jesus, his disciples in Palestine 2,000 years ago, knew the importance of sheep; knew how people depended on them, what they symbolised in Jewish history and tradition and they weren't offended to be called sheep; they didn't feel belittled in the way we might today.

So, I leave you with that thought: don't believe the modern clichés about mutton. Sometimes it's not a bad thing to be a sheep; you can be individual, you can have your own identity, but you can also feel protected when you're part of a flock and you follow a shepherd like Jesus.

Amen