

Leavening Church

Thought for Sunday 25th April (Steve Langton)

The theme of this week's readings is very obvious. First we have the most well-known Psalm:

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,

³ he refreshes my soul. ([Psalm 23](#))

And then we have another familiar passage about sheep and shepherds, this time from St John's gospel:

¹¹ 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

¹⁴ 'I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷ The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.' ([John 10:11-18](#))

In this day and age the sheep metaphor is less familiar to most people than it would have been in gospel times. Even commercial sheep farmers may struggle with it, because inevitably they will not know every sheep as an individual when they have a flock of hundreds. But for those of us who keep small flocks of sheep it rings very true, even though we may draw the line at laying down our lives for them! We do know our sheep by name and we know their different personalities. They know us and recognise us when we approach them.

However, it is important to remember that this is not a relationship of equals, and there is a gulf in understanding between the shepherd and the sheep. The sheep do not understand why they can't go and eat that lovely field of grass that is being kept to make their hay for the winter. And they haven't a clue why we insist on sticking that horrible tasting wormer down their throats. Our care for them operates at a level that the sheep cannot understand.

Similarly, we must not make the mistake of pretending that we are equal to God and can understand all his ways – that was the mistake of Job's comforters. Yes he is our friend and our loving father, but his depth of understanding goes far beyond our human intelligence. Theologians and philosophers will try to explore the relationship between God and humankind, and there is nothing wrong with that. But in the end there are some things in life that will make no sense to us. All we can do is stand back in awe and worship, and have faith that our heavenly father cares for us.