

Easter 4 John 10:1-10

Sheep are a popular animal for farming purposes, you encounter sheep the world over but there are some places particularly known for sheep. One such place is Wales and as I author this sermon for use in many contexts, I cannot avoid my personal knowledge of the Welsh sheep. Sheep are commonplace around Welsh towns. The hills surrounding the valleys are covered with them and there was a time when it was impossible, even if you lived in a town, to avoid confrontation from time to time.

Australian sheep seem to be of gentle, almost compliant temperament, that is not the case with valleys sheep, you do not mess with a valley sheep if you know what's good for you! Despite having a reputation for stupidity, these sheep were not only clever, they were sneaky too. Each week, just once a week, the sheep would roam the town in packs, as farfetched as it sounds. The mountains where they grazed were not fenced and they could mostly be trusted to stay where the lovely green grass was, that was except one morning each week, the morning the bins were put out.

The sheep had some sort of calendar system that meant that they knew it was bin day, either that or their eye sight was so keen they could spot a black bag from miles away. Every week people did what they could to secure their bins, and every week the metal bins were knocked over and the rubbish strewn all over the streets. They didn't leave it at that, of course, if you've made a trip into town you might as well make a day of it. They would get into gardens and allotments causing havoc, they would wander around in the road causing traffic accidents.

Week after week, shepherds would have to round up their flocks from the bright lights of the town, back up to the mountainside, and using just astonishingly trained dogs they could lure the sheep away from the draw of the bins and gardens and back to the mundane grass of the fields. It never ceased to amaze, first why the sheep came to visit, but more so why they would go back just because the shepherd wanted them to.

Clearly these animals have a will of their own, the shepherd has no chance of catching one sheep in a race let alone a herd of the things all off in different directions, and yet there is a relationship of trust between them that like a child who wants to do their own thing but submits to the will of a parent that says no, so the sheep, despite often straying, can be called back and will follow the one they trust.

So, with this ingrained understanding of the mind of the sheep, it has never really been surprising that Jesus uses the analogy of shepherding when referring to himself, We are just like those sheep, wilful and curious, always wanting to see what else is out there for us, constantly testing boundaries deliberately or else just wandering off, attracted to something that takes us away from the safety of our Lord's presence and into the unknown.

We do it when the worries of the world become overwhelming and instead of laying our problems before the Lord in prayer we try to figure out how to fix them ourselves. We do it when we become mesmerised by the world's ideas of success and we seek after money and things, not starting out greedy, just wanting to make our way, but later on, more and more we need the next thing, we want just a little more security, we work a little harder and we sacrifice a little more. But the Lord is our shepherd, the psalmist says, we will want for nothing, everything we need is provided for us. We don't need to be overtaken by desire for these things, but rather we need to be

mindful of the rich blessings we have received. We must want what we have rather than having what we want to truly understand God's gifts to us and to accept them gratefully. The Lord is our shepherd, he will make us lie down in green pastures, he will furnish a table for us and our cup shall overflow.

What a promise, what a hope. Being compared to a sheep doesn't seem all that bad when we come to understand how we will live as followers of this shepherd. He will not fence us in, he will not cage us and force our obedience. But he will speak to us with his wonderful calming voice, he will love us wherever we go and whatever we do. Each time we stray he will not only welcome us when we find our way back, he will come after us and seek us out. If we are in trouble he will offer assistance, if we are in denial he will wait patiently until we recognise him.

The valleys sheep have been forced into submission, their weekly trips into town were ended some years ago as it was felt the damage they did was too much and the risk they posed too great. Farmers face hefty fines if a sheep is found loose that can be traced back to them and so fences have been built stronger, procedures tightened up and sheep keep their distance on the mountainside.

And yet, if you go to them, drive up the mountain with a picnic or travel over the Rhigos mountain to the permanent ice cream van and stop for a treat, you will encounter them. The sheep continue to be curious, bold and a bit dangerous. They will organise themselves into teams where one causes a distraction while the others steal your food. They show no fear of the things that do them harm like people and cars and they continue to get themselves into all kinds of trouble.

Yes, comparing us to sheep is just about right. We must be a constant frustration to the Lord but we are also worth everything to him that he endures with us and for us. We do lose our way from time to time but we find we know his voice, we get invited away by other distractions but in the end we do not recognise those voices like we recognise the Lord. They do not ultimately bring us satisfaction, they do not make us feel safe. But the Lord is our Shepherd, we shall lack nothing and as we follow him so goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.