

Easter 4 – 13 April 2008 – The Rev. Dr. Guy J.D. Collins

May I speak in the name of God, Fiver, Forgiver and Lover. Amen.

Two days ago I was driving along rural Vermont lane. On one side of the road there were flooded fields from the snowmelt. Munching on some hay a group of cattle were huddling on a small elevated patch that was just high enough to escape the deluge. The other side of the road was a steeper hill bounded by a traditional white fence. And on the far side of the fence three little lambs were doing what can only be described as gamboling. They must have been only a few weeks old and they were skipping along and chasing one another and generally having a rather wonderful time of it. The entire scene was utterly bucolic. But the thought that crossed my mind was how long the lovely little lambs would have before their journey to the abattoir.

I think there is a tendency to sentimentalize cuddly little lambs. Just as we sentimentalize their woolly parents. For those of us not actively involved in the hard work of lambing, sheep dipping, tagging, inoculating, feeding, shearing and, yes, taking to market, slaughtering, lambs and sheep represent a beautiful and fantastical idyll. But in the ancient world, as today, those who work with sheep, the shepherds, know the cuddly little things as a weighty responsibility with not much intelligence. As an aside, pig farmers will tell you just how intelligent their pigs are, and I wonder whether that fact alone may not have some bearing on the proscription against eating them that is found in the Hebrew scriptures.

So, returning to sheep, we know that sheep are dependable and useful, there is much that sheep give to

us that we need. But we also know that they are rather good at following without questioning, and they are also not particularly inquisitive. I'm not at all convinced that these last two attributes are the kind of gifts that one should be encouraging in disciples. And yet, thanks to both Jesus and the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm, the sheep has been at the heart of Christian depictions of the life of faith.

Its tempting to want to expunge the imagery of the sheep as somehow too contaminated by modern urban and suburban distance from this particular clothing and food source. But that would be to deny us access to perhaps the most important resonance that sheep had to the people of Jesus's time. However old fashioned caring for sheep may appear to us denizens of the internet age, the fact remains that without the sheep we wouldn't be able to have the shepherd.

I imagine that spending just a few weeks as a shepherd today I would be enormously physically demanding. The only compensation I can think of would be driving a four wheel drive or all terrain vehicle across some of the most beautiful landscapes. But once again I am probably guilty of romanticizing a tough job.

Hard as modern day shepherding is, it doesn't remotely compare to how incredibly onerous it was for the shepherds Jesus and the psalmist are comparing God to.

Today shepherding is not one of the more desirable professions for those eager to earn status or financial reward. But in the ancient world, the shepherd was not only smelly, but ritually unclean. Being a shepherd involved spending so much time as an itinerant with your sheep that it was practically impossible to keep the religious law. Add to that the very real physical danger you stood in from being alone in times of sheep rustling and violence, and you start to have a lot less rosy a picture of shepherding.

The fact of the matter is that a shepherd was a liminal person. While the commodities that sheep produce have always been extremely highly valued, the labor involved in bringing those commodities to market was never particularly valued. Which in a way makes it the most perfect image possible for Jesus to appropriate.

Like an ancient shepherd, we rely on God to do that which we don't particularly want to think about. God gives us forgiveness and unconditional love so that we don't need to obsess about earning God's love or forgiveness. And in return for this graciousness, most of the time we fool ourselves into thinking that we don't need to respond. Like the townsfolk of every pastoral society, we are more than happy for the labor of the shepherd. But we are less keen to honor the shepherd and to give the shepherd proper social recognition.

The question today seems to be whether we are willing to allow the darker side of the shepherding metaphor to get to us. So long as we remain with the cute gamboling lambs the biblical metaphor will be as irrelevant to us and our life choices.

But if we can start to see God as the shepherd who is present in the toughest and most difficult spiritual places, then we might finally start to understand. For if God really does care for us as a shepherd cares for their flock, then we need to ask ourselves to what end is that care for? Now I am not suggesting that we are like lambs being bred for slaughter. But I am suggesting that God nourishes us with love and forgiveness for a reason that has more to do than simply giving us good mental health. It strikes me that just as the sheep are eventually transformed into something beneficent and life enriching, so we as followers of Christ are asked to undergo transformation.

Its definitely not enough to remain in a vertical relationship with God as the sheep is to the shepherd. Instead we have to take our place within a wider social network. Each of us has received much, indeed everything, from the shepherd, and as followers of Christ we have to ask ourselves what we are going to give back to God through service to the greater human family.

Of course on one topic Jesus will brook no dissent, and that is the status of the flock. There are not multiple and competing flocks. There is one flock. And as we are part of that one flock, so we have a duty to the whole. Jesus also proclaims that he is the gate into the sheepfold. I know that for many this will sound sectarian and divisive. But nowhere does Jesus say that this gate is not found in different places. Equally, as Jesus is found in different places, so I pray that you may work out for yourself what the shepherd requires of you. Amen.