

Sunday Worship for 25 April

The Fourth Sunday of Easter: 'Meeting the Good Shepherd Where We Are'

SERMON

Rev Rachel Mann

I grew up in a very rural part of the country – Worcestershire. Nonetheless, for me shepherds were people who appeared in Nativity plays or plied their trade in faraway places like Africa or ... Yorkshire. You saw them on the telly on *One Man and the Dog*, whistling to their collie dog, instructing her to corral the sheep into the sheepfold. Is it surprising that for many of us in a modern urban world, the metaphor of God as shepherd might feel a little distant, old fashioned or overlaid with sentimentality? Yet, Jesus says, 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.' This behaviour he contrasts with the 'hired hand' who runs away at the appearance of a predator and thereby leaves the sheep they're supposed to guard to their fate. This contrast between the behaviour of the shepherd and the hired hand is very far from sentimental ideas about country life. This is a vision of a shepherd who cares for the creatures for whom he or she is responsible so deeply that they would take on predators and who threaten to harm and kill; who would pay the ultimate sacrifice.

Perhaps we begin to glimpse the depth of love Jesus has for us, the people of his pasture. I'm not alone in kicking back against the idea that I or any follower of Jesus is a sheep. Many of us have such negative ideas about them. The rock band Pink Floyd, whom I love, wrote a song called 'Sheep', all about people who can't think for themselves, who have a herd mentality; who will follow, en masse, the loudest voice; who are scared enough of the sheep dog that they will do exactly what it asks. Well, that's one image of sheep. Jesus' love for us reveals a different picture: it is not that we – his sheep – are stupid or unthinking, but that we are this beautifully connected up and mutually dependent community that are worthy of being saved.

You see, that's the thing about sheep. Their strength lies in being together. They are not apex predators. Jesus sees that we, as humans, are at our best when we act as a community rather than acting like predators who attack the vulnerable. Jesus's love runs so deep he will go looking for each one of us if we get separated from the rest and made vulnerable to attack. For he knows that we are not made for cold, bleak lonely places, separated from our community and friends. At times, I like many have found the pandemic so lonely. I've been separated. But Jesus finds the way of connection. Services like this are just one way he brings his flock back into community.

Jesus lays down his life for us all that we might have life. For me, the deepest beauty and wonder of this is that he is both the shepherd who saves us from all and the lamb offered in sacrifice. There is deep mystery here, but what moves me in this is how such is Jesus' love and solidarity with us that he becomes one of us. God saves from within our midst. He is the shepherd who will stand in the way of predators; he is also a lamb who gives himself freely that the rest of us might have the fullness of life.

Amen.