

My Sheep Hear My Voice

4 Easter C, 5/8/22

I will be first to admit that I don't know much about sheep. My cousins who live in the Cotswolds know a lot about them, though they do not much like them. My wife and our friends who raise alpacas, who between them have knit with every form of yarn known to needles, know a fair bit about them, though they do not much like them, either. Most of what I know about sheep I learned from them, at various county fairs, or from reading cookbooks, fairy tales, or the Bible, some of whose books have the flavor of fairy tales, cookbooks, or county fairs, if we're honest. That's not, I will be the first to admit, a lot.

Yet it is not nothing. Sheep wander through those books rather as they might the plains of Moab or Jericho, giving bovine color to the myths and legal codes, the self-serving near-histories, the words of sage advice, and even the songs. Key verses include: "We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture," "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," and "Behold, I send you as sheep amongst wolves." This last sits uneasily with the other two, yet it is the nature of sheep to find themselves amongst both shepherds and wolves, if rarely at the same time. Sheep know to fear the wolves, but never seem to work out that they have cause to worry about the shepherd also, sheepskin coats and lamb chops being what they are, and highly prized. The only time I saw a sheep do anything spirited was when I watched one struggle against its shearer, who meant it well. I have never seen one give the slightest resistance to, or even notice, the hand that wields the knife that leads to the preparing of the leather and the cooking of the lamb.

Perhaps it is for this reason that I am wary pastoral imagery, particularly that of Jesus the Good Shepherd, the one who lays his life down for the sheep, and who tells his disciples to "feed my sheep" and "tend my lambs." It all makes for a pretty picture,

I admit, with a Jesus who typically looks in such pictures like he could've passed muster as the Marlboro Man but instead dressed in Ancient Peasant Costume #1 and being kind to farm animals, but *to what end?* I want to ask. Why, exactly, do shepherds tend sheep. Why do we set aside places where said sheep may safely graze? Is it not so that the shepherd, and eventually we, may draw the ultimate benefit from that grazing? I ask this mindful of the line I just quoted about Jesus sending his own out as sheep amongst wolves.

It's an open question in my mind which animal gets the shorter shrift in the Bible: the snake or the wolf. Now and again a roaring lion makes an unwelcome presence, prowling and growling outside looking to ensnare the unwary, though that is offset by the kingly figure of the Lion of Judah. But I find little by way of redeeming imagery of the creatures that slither or that hunt in packs. Indeed, the nicest things one hears of them is what is said of the Peaceable Kingdom (Isaiah 11), in which the wolf shall lie down with the lamb and the child put its hand, unmolested, into the viper's den. But that is in the world to come, not in the world as it is.

In that world, as shown in today's passage from the Gospel of John, we see that people are capable not only of looking a gift horse in the mouth, but poking its teeth and pulling its tongue. It speaks of Jews in the city of Jerusalem who are trying to figure out whether Jesus is the Messiah. They want to know for sure, so they come out point blank and ask him. What he says to them is, in essence, "Duh. I done told you already, but you don't listen, or listen but then ignore it." They've heard his words, seen his signs of power, watched him heal the sick and set people free from what ails them in body, soul, or mind, he reminds them, and still they refuse to accept what this means: the Messiah you're getting is not the Messiah you were looking for. You need to get right with that, O people of Jerusalem, but you won't, because you're not really mine.

It is a stunning rejection, quite typical of the Gospel of John. Jesus tells them that “I and the Father are one,” and that those who are his own know his voice and hearken to it, and will know through him a life that will not end. He will lose none that are his own, but those who are not his own are already lost. They are as lost as were those church prelates who refused to look into Galileo’s telescope and see the actual moons of Jupiter, so much did they want to cling to falsehoods and outmoded beliefs. They are as those who would not listen when geometers proved the world to not be flat, or physiologists proved how blood flows and what the brain does, or when geologists proved that the earth is far older than people imagined and contains in its own rocks a record of eons of its own history. The people to whom Jesus speaks have seen a man walk among them who could do what no-one else could. They have heard him speak with the authority of one who does not have to explain the source of his authority, but who embodies it in everything he says and everything he does. They’re watching him change the world, one freed soul at a time, and they don’t believe it. They don’t believe it because it wasn’t what they wanted. They don’t believe it because they don’t know how to make a place inside themselves for its novelty or its implications. They don’t believe that Jesus is the Messiah because he’s not doing what they want a Messiah to do: drive out the Roman *imperium* and restore Israel as an independent monarchy under its own, let us pray at last worthy, priest-kings.

Jesus isn’t going to do that – not despite being the Messiah but because he is. “My sheep hear my voice” he reminds the people of that perennially doomed city. “I know them, and they follow me.” And how do they “follow me”? By doing what he tells them to do: love God, love your neighbor as yourself, love yourself as well as your neighbor, and love one another as I have loved you. But they also follow him by becoming like him, or would, channeling his spirit along with his power, much in the manner as Peter does in the reading from Acts, raising a little girl from the

dead much as Jesus had. Yet it were as likely for a sheep to become its own shepherd, as far as the people listening to Jesus near the temple in today's gospel were concerned, as for any of the children of men to become one with God. Once Jesus said, "I and the Father are one," the people in Jerusalem who had not already hearkened to his voice stopped listening to him at all.

In the minds of those who wrote this gospel, 'those people' aren't really the people of Jerusalem, but their own neighbors who rejected their faith and, often as not, their very persons. Those neighbors, their fellow Jews of the Greco-Roman world, had no trouble with the concept of the two great commandments – after all, they're as fundamental to the Hebrew Bible and to rabbinic Judaism as they are, or are meant to be, to Christianity at any speed. They did have trouble with the resurrection of the body, the life everlasting, and the idea (key to both) that the very logic and order of the universe had taken human form in Jesus, and as such had become the Messiah everybody needed but that no-one was expecting, and who would let anyone become part of that if only they believed. To believe in this sense is to accept as real something one did not expect and does not yet fully understand. What such faith asks is not that one make Kierkegaard's famous leap or Nietzsche's famous stare, but to take one simple step: out over a chasm whose walkway is made of something so clear that looks like it isn't there at all. Take one, then take another, and enter into a new world – one that was always there beneath and around the one you knew. This is not faith in what is not seen, but faith in what one can't quite accept one does see: something is there that I had thought could not be, yet here we are.

"My sheep," they held that Jesus said, "hear my voice. They know me, and they follow me." They would not do so if they had not heard it – would follow perhaps the voice of the hireling or the howl of the wolf, the baa-ing right next to them, or the devices and desires of their hearts – for sheep have beating hearts, too, which the shepherd's knife stops more often than does anything else, mutton chops and flokati

rugs being what they are. What we're left with is the not altogether pleasing image of Jesus as the Christ being to us as a human shepherd is to actual sheep – so far above us that we need a new kind of ruler to measure it, and with a mind and a reach of that mind so far beyond our imagining that we can't even imagine what we don't know, yet enabling us to become one with him if we believe that we can and then act on it. Take that step out into what looks like the void. Take another one after it. Follow his voice, no matter what. Even if it costs you everything you have, he will lead you home, with Brother Miles, Brother Raymond, and all who have taken those steps before us, and he will never let you go. *Amen.*