

As most of you will know, before coming to Aylesford as Vicar, I was a Chaplain at Burrswood Hospital for nearly 6 years.

Burrswood is set in some beautiful countryside on the edge of the Ashdown Forest. I was privileged to live on site, and literally fell out of my bungalow into the surrounding woods and fields. It is especially beautiful in Spring, and in many of the fields, I would enjoy watching the new born lambs playing, or being suckled by their mothers.

It is wonderful to watch these young animals, and to see the way in which they begin to explore the world around them and instinctively bond with their mothers.

It never ceases to amaze me, how the parent animals, and the young manage to recognise each other's call.

Imagine a field of sheep with their lambs. All the different bleats – and yet, somehow, amongst all that sound, each ewe hears and recognises the call of their lamb.

It is also remarkable, the way in which a close bond develops between the animals and those who care for them. The shepherd or farmer is soon recognised as someone who brings food and water, ensures that there is shelter and gives help when the animals are distressed in any way.

Once when I was walking in some fields near the Bluebell Railway in Sussex, around this time of year. Within minutes of coming into the field, I was surrounded by hundreds of sheep and lambs. I suppose, I was wearing something similar to their shepherd – a green coat and corduroy trousers, and Wellington boots.

It was not long, however, before they realised their mistake and knew that I wasn't their shepherd – my voice was different – and so they very soon dispersed across the field again, and I was able to continue with my walk.

Jesus used many images drawn from nature to teach important messages about God and our relationship with him.

Today in our Gospel reading, Jesus tells the parable of the Lost Sheep to help us understand God's love and concern for us. It is just like that of a shepherd caring for his sheep. In the Old Testament, God is often described as the Shepherd of his People – both by the Prophets and in the Psalms – the familiar words of Psalm 23 declare that “The Lord is my Shepherd.” In John's Gospel, Jesus describes himself as “The Good Shepherd.”

This image is a beautiful one, which speaks very clearly to us, but it would have spoken even more clearly to those Jesus was talking to. At the time of Jesus, there were many sheep in the fields throughout Galilee. Sheep and shepherds were an everyday scene.

The role of the shepherd was a little different then. The shepherds virtually lived out in the fields with their sheep. They would even sleep on the hillsides during the night, to keep watch over their sheep. And so a very strong bond would have developed. Wherever the shepherd went, the sheep followed.

It all sounds very idyllic – out in the countryside all day – blue sky overhead. But the reality definitely was not all green pastures and still waters.

There were many dangers out on the hillsides – wild which might attack the sheep, and rustlers who might try to steal the sheep.

At night then, the shepherd would gather all the sheep safely into the sheepfold or sheep pen. At the time of Jesus, this would have been an area enclosed by a circular stone wall, with just a narrow entrance into it.

When all the sheep were inside, the shepherd would lay down across the entrance – he would be like a human gate or doorway.

That would make it very difficult for any one to get in – whether it was someone trying to steal the sheep, or a wild animal, which might have attacked the sheep.

In the parable, Jesus is saying that we are like the sheep, and he is like the shepherd. As the shepherd cares for his sheep, God will care for us.

But just as for the sheep, life is not all green pastures and still waters, Jesus knew that for his followers there would be many hardships, and many dangers.

There would be times, when others would deliberately try to steal them away from Jesus and their faith and trust in him.

There would be many other voices telling them that the grass was greener on the other side.

Just as the shepherd is there to protect his sheep, Jesus is there for us to help and guide us, when we face danger or difficulty.

In our world today, we hear many different voices – on the radio, on the television – in our places of work.

So many of these voices are telling us that our lives would be better if we did this, or we did that, if we believed in this, or in that.

It can sometimes be bewildering, trying to work out the right thing to do, knowing which way to go. Like sheep, we can sometimes feel hopelessly lost. We can go astray and get into all kinds of difficulties and dangers.

In this parable, Jesus assures us that he will not abandon us, and that he will always be looking out for us. However far we might stray from his paths. However, hopeless lost we might become; in his love for us, God comes looking for us, to guide us safely back to the fold.

God's capacity to love and to forgive is always much greater than ours. The scribes and the Pharisees were grumbling because Jesus was eating with tax collectors and sinners. In their eyes, those who were not living their lives in accordance with the religious laws of the day were a lost cause and should be abandoned to their own fate.

In total contrast to this, Jesus tells the parable of the Lost Sheep, which was followed by the Parable of the Lost Coin. The message of both, is loud and clear.

God loves us all!

However bad we might feel about ourselves, However, far we might have gone astray, God will not abandon us. His heart is always open and ready to welcome us back into the fold. And for that thanks be to God.

I would like to end by sharing with you a meditation I wrote a few years ago – inspired by the Biblical images of God as our Shepherd, and by the sheep in the fields around Burrswood.

The Good Shepherd cares for me...

Whenever I wander from the path

and follow my own ways –

When I am tempted to be selfish;

When I am unkind or rude;

When I refuse to forgive;

When I cannot bring myself to say sorry;

***The Good Shepherd gently reminds me of his ways
and calls me back.***

Whenever I get caught in the brambles and thorns of this
world –

When I cannot let go of things from the past;

When I am wrapped up in feelings of guilt and shame;

When I am ensnared by anger and bitterness;

When I am trapped by fears and doubts;

***The Good Shepherd gently frees me to move forward
in his love.***

Whenever I stumble and fall on rocky ground –
When I fall into ways of behaving I know are wrong;
When I have no time or energy to continue;
When I am beguiled by the ways of the world;
When I feel broken by the events and circumstances
around me;

The Good Shepherd, gently lifts me onto safe ground.

Whenever I grow weak for lack of nourishment –
When I forget to pray;
When I am too busy to read his word;
When I think I can do things on my own;
When I withdraw from fellowship with others;

The Good Shepherd, nourishes me through his spirit.

The Good Shepherd cares for me...

I recognise him in the kindness of a stranger;
I hear his voice in the words of comfort spoken by a friend;
I feel his embrace in the mending of a broken relationship;
I know his touch upon my life through his transforming
spirit;
I recognise his presence in the bread and wine with which
he feeds me.

The Lord is my Shepherd... Thanks be to God. Amen.

Meditation

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