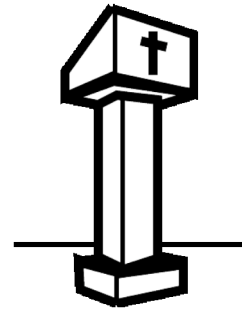


Sermon Synopsis

Sheep

by the Rev. John McDermott
The Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 15, 2011



Text: Psalm 23:1, The Lord is my shepherd...

It will not come as a surprise if I tell you that sheep are going to play a considerable part in this sermon. I doubt if you could find in the lectionary a set of lessons more unified in theme than those set for today, and that theme definitely has to do with sheep...and shepherds. My text is the familiar opening of the 23rd Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd," and if that psalm seems just a bit more familiar than usual to you today it probably is because it was the appointed psalm just six weeks ago in the midst of Lent.

I have to admit at the start that my personal acquaintance with either sheep or shepherds is very slight. Kind of nonexistent really. But keeping that in mind I'm going to start by recalling an ordination sermon I heard in Baltimore a long time ago that was devoted to sheep. Ordination is in our thoughts because we are looking forward to the ordination of Patricia Pearson to the diaconate at Grace Cathedral on June 4. The person whose ordination I attended back then was a young man I knew from the days when he had been a student at the school where I taught. The preacher was a distinguished Episcopal rector who come down from New Haven, Connecticut. He had been a friend and mentor to the ordinand during his seminary years. He was an Episcopal rector of the old school with a kind of upper-class aura, recalling an era, now definitely past, when the Episcopal Church was not made all that uneasy by being referred to as "the Republican Party at prayer." (I hardly need to say that neither the Episcopal Church nor the Republican Party is very much like what it was a generation or so ago.)

Now I greatly doubt that this gentleman had had any more close up and personal contact with sheep than I have had, but sheep indeed were his subject. I thought it was a great sermon, an absolute model of preaching in the Anglican mold as it used to be understood. If you watched the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton a couple of weeks ago, the sermon—minus the English accent—would give you an idea of the kind of style I'm thinking of. (Personally I loved the whole service, but I know it wouldn't be everyone's "cup of tea." And the music! Featured were C. Hubert H. Parry's greatest hits. Never heard of C. Hubert? Don't feel bad. The commentators on TV, even British ones, seemed vague about him.) Anyhow, to get back to this ordination sermon, I thought it was great, and others I spoke to agreed with me on that, though I later heard that at least one person left the service grumbling that the sermon was terrible! an insult to the ordinand! Well, sermons do affect people differently, but still, such a divergence of opinion.

Let me give you an idea of the sermon's content. The text was taken from the very next verse of the Gospel of John that follows the Gospel reading we just heard, that is, John, chapter 10, verse 11: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for

the sheep.” The preacher said that to get at the meaning of that statement, one had to have in mind what it really means to be a shepherd—and what it really means to be a sheep. Sheep, he said, have well-defined characteristics: they are very dirty, very stupid, and very terrified – always. Dirty, stupid, and terrified. You can’t just send them off to graze in the morning and expect them to come trooping home at night or anything like that. No, it just won’t work.

A human being, the shepherd, has to share the lot of these poor creatures. It is his task really to be one with them. The shepherd is forced to live in such a way that he is pretty dirty himself. He risks being thought not very smart because he associates with such dumb animals. He also cuts himself off completely from human society. Opinion differs as to whether that’s altogether a bad thing or not, but, in any case, it’s terribly lonely work. Finally, of course, there’s got to be one great difference between sheep and shepherd. Whereas the sheep live life in a panic, a shepherd, if he is a good shepherd, must be very courageous, must indeed be ready to risk his life for the sheep. There’s no denying that the shepherd’s lot is a hard one.

For a long time sheep herding has ranked close to the top of the list of jobs that U. S. citizens do not want to do. I know in the past sheep herding was undertaken by Basque immigrants who then settled in this country. Recently I read that there are 800 plus shepherds in the United States and almost without exception they are here on temporary visas from Chile, Peru, Bolivia, and Mexico. Quite apart from the difficulties of the job itself they often find that they are not very well-treated by their employers. So indeed, the shepherd’s lot is not an easy one. It is no light thing to say that the Lord is our shepherd.

And, once more, think of those sheep: dirty, stupid, terrified...sheep viewed without sentimentality. This is the kind of flock that our shepherd Lord has to deal with. Now—and this was the crux of the sermon I heard—how did this reality apply to an ordination? Did we imagine that the person being ordained was about to be transformed from a sheep into a shepherd? No, indeed no! A sheep the ordinand was and a sheep he—or she, if that were the case—would remain, like the rest of us, a very frail type of being, very much in need of a shepherd’s guidance. At most, the preacher continued, we might hope that the newly ordained might be a “bellwether” for the flock, that is, a sheep that has shown glimmerings of enough sense that it will, as our Gospel lesson suggested, know its master’s voice and, that, therefore, is provided with a little bell around its neck so that it can signal the flock as it starts off in response to the shepherd’s call, hopefully more or less in the right direction.

Well, that was the sermon, clear and insightful to my mind. Yet at least one listener went away feeling insulted. “Dirty sheep,” he probably thought, “Not a very nice thing to call the ordinand!” Very possibly the offended party suspected that he himself had been classed as dirty, stupid and terrified. Humph!

In fact the sermon was true and right for the occasion, but perhaps the unhappy listener did have a point. This was not the whole truth about sheep, especially about sheep as stand-ins for people. For one thing, sheep don’t have to be viewed with such hard-eyed realism, especially when they are doing duty as symbols and not just producing lamb chops and wool. A little sentiment, a little pathos can be allowed to color the depiction. After all, the sheep has a certain air of innocence, dumb innocence to be sure. As a

symbol of human frailty, it's comforting that it is a creature that means well; it blunders into trouble rather than otherwise. It "nibbles itself lost," as George Buttrick, a preacher who meant a lot to me during my college years, once said, it "nibbles itself lost," a bite here and a bite there, slowly drifting off from the flock until the shepherd in compassion seeks it out and brings it home.

Furthermore, the facts of sheepish nature, viewed with or without sentiment, do not fully cover the human condition. If sheep are going to stand in for people, then they have to be a very special breed, sheep with a difference. In our sheepish hearts there are goings-on wholly unimaginable in the species, *ovis aries*, but inseparable from *homo sapiens*: strange stirrings, currents of inspiration, unaccountable longings, hope, a sense of destiny! All quite beyond the ovine norm.

Sheep-like we are: not always pleasant to be around, not so bright, not very brave, yes, but nonetheless sheep gifted with special insights. One such insight: we have a shepherd of a most extraordinary kind..."The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Another insight: not only does this shepherd share our lot, as a good shepherd should, but in some way, to some degree, it is open to us to share his lot, to receive from him not only a "cup that runneth over," but also the gift of a transformed heart and soul. We are sheep with a hope!



**Half Dome of
Santa Cecilia in
Trastevere**

One of the ancient churches in Rome, Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, is built on the site of the home of the third century martyr, St. Cecilia, the patron saint of music. Filling the half dome over the altar there is a mosaic dating from the early ninth century. A figure of Jesus dominates in the center; holy men and women are ranged beside him. The style is archaic, austere and angular, almost intimidating. By this time Jesus himself is no longer depicted as an actual shepherd surrounded by sheep as he often was in the earliest Christian art. No, the figure of Jesus is dressed in a formal robe, and it is larger than the others. It has a halo and great staring eyes and raises its hand in blessing. This is a divine figure, above us and remote. But even though Jesus no longer appears as a shepherd, beneath this main section in a band along the bottom of the mosaic one still

sees sheep, a dozen of them, each like the other, and each looking up with the most soulful expression imaginable at the vision of the Savior. These are the Christian faithful, sheep-like, yes, yet inexplicably able not only to follow the shepherd, but, somehow, in some degree to commune with him, to be at one with him. Within this Christian flock powers and attributes appear, the powers and attributes of the Good Shepherd himself, suddenly transmuting sheepish reality into something much finer.

That's why those sheep in the old mosaic look so soulful. They are creatures recreated, suffused with a new kind of being. No wonder they look to their Lord with such anticipation. Ah, to be lifted out of a state of being dirty, stupid, and terrified, to be lifted out of that and to hear such words of promise as those which conclude today's Gospel: "I come that [you] may have life and have it more abundantly." Here are words of promise indeed, promise of the work of the Good Shepherd within his flock, or, to paraphrase the ending of the 23rd Psalm, "Surely with such a shepherd goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Amen