



In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

This week I have become the proud adopted father of eight chicks. We collected the eggs up from our hens over 3 weeks ago, placed them carefully into the incubator, and said our prayers for them. I was hopeful for 4, but the Lord in all his wisdom has blessed us with 8. For those of you with an interest in chickens, they are a cross between a leghorn male and warren cross females, so goodness knows how they will turn out. They're currently located in a large plastic box on my study floor, waiting to be moved into their new palatial dwelling that Theodor and I made for them with a plastic tray, some cardboard boxes and old medical curtains.

The process of raising the chicks has been a real delight for the whole family. Although not quite the same as shepherding, trying to keep track of 8 chicks as they disperse across the study has been a real challenge and has given me a greater appreciation of the trials of shepherding!

We get two slightly different messages this week about Christ's identity but they are both very closely linked. The first image is the most familiar, Christ as shepherd, we see it in the Peter reading, and also in Psalm 23. The idea of the Lord as shepherd is probably the oldest descriptions of God's character in the Old Testament.

Traditionally shepherds guided their flocks across, often vast distances to find the best pasture for their sheep. This is particularly true in the Middle East where the hot dry climate makes finding good pasture more difficult. If you travel to the Middle East today you will still see people shepherding in this way. The image of shepherding suggests caring, watching over, protecting This is what we see in Psalm 23 which points to the Lord as one who cares for his sheep. The care of the Lord is so great that the sheep, are never in need of anything, 'the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want'. A Lord who protects the sheep even through the darkest of valleys. There is great re-assurance in this for us, as the sheep of the Lord. The psalm is often read at funerals because of the protective, watchful, caring imagery offering comfort in life's darkest valleys.

We often think of sheep as being rather stupid creatures and assume that the sheep reference says something about human stupidity before God. But sheep are not actually as stupid as is often portrayed, and I

am sure the writers of the Bible, nor Christ himself who would have lived very close to sheep and shepherding would have not been thinking of the sheep as stupid. As an example of this, in 2004 in West Yorkshire, a group of sheep somehow taught themselves to role over cattle grids to raid the gardens of a nearby village. An ingenious method of escape really.

Although perhaps not quite as stupid as is sometimes assumed, sheep are still fairly helpless creatures and also remarkably similar to humans. A sheep's instinct when in danger is to herd and run away. Safety in numbers, an instinct humans often resort to. Sheep are also pretty blind followers and are easily led even into danger. How true this also is of humans, with countless examples of governments throughout history exploiting this. Yet sheep also have an independent streak which causes them to wander off and get themselves lost, again a quality we share with them So when we look at 1 Peter where humanity is spoken of as being like a sheep who has gone astray, it is something we can easily relate to really. How often we get our own ideas into our heads that lead us down futile paths that end up causing us all sorts of problems. 1 Peter shows us that our safety is found in Christ our shepherd who takes upon himself our sins, all our dead ends in life and turns us around to follow him again.

The second image we have comes from the Gospel of Christ as the gate. That can seem a little bit of a strange image, especially if you think about it too much, metal or wood, what sort of lock does he have, how many hinges etc. but Christ here is probably referring to the idea of a sheepfold. A sheepfold was basically a stone enclosure with a doorway for sheep to be kept in, particularly overnight. The shepherd would sleep in the entrance to keep predators out and sheep in. King David is referred to as having been chosen by God from the sheepfold in psalm 78. So, Christ as a gate is one who protects the sheep and keeps out the enemy.

So I think what we see from our readings today is a call to remind us to stay close to Christ, who, as 1 Peter says, is the guardian of our souls. The Gospel of John reminds us that there is a very real threat from the 'thief' whose only concern is to kill and to destroy. We therefore need to be wary, not only of leading ourselves astray with our own silly ideas, but also of those who seek to lead us astray. Anything or anyone that seeks to lead us away from our faith in Christ is a thief seeking to kill and destroy.

Lockdown, is I know very hard for very many at this time, my worry is that malaise seeps in and we begin to take faith too lightly and we lose sight of Christ as our shepherd and wander off on our own and end up in a dark valley. We must now more than ever pray that we remain safe within the sheepfold safe from the thief seeking to kill and destroy. I want to commend all of you for the hard work you are putting in to keep in touch with others, for the ceaseless prayers that I know are being said, and for the ministry being offered in a whole variety of ways. Although our movements may be restricted, we can continue to sing the Lord's praise in our own 'home churches' where we can find blessing and assurance through our Lord and Saviour, our great shepherd.

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