

## Reflection for Sunday 25 April

In the words of Farmer's Weekly, 'one of the highlights of the farming year, lambing season, is a challenging but joy-filled time for Britain's farmers.' To someone like me, who's never had to go for nights without sleep, nor has had to cope with trying to feed fifty pet lambs, the appearance of these little woolly creatures is, as Farmer's Weekly itself says, one of the 'magical moments' of the entire year.

This year, in these hills, lambing (it's not yet over, of course) seems to be going pretty well. The cold snap didn't help, but the unusual dryness of April helped to redress the balance. Cold and wet together is what farmers dread most at lambing time.

You've little choice but to be singled-minded if you're a sheep farmer at this time of the year. Sheep, whose lives can seem almost unreasonably fragile, can demand a lot of care, notwithstanding those hardy ewes which give birth alone, unaided on the high fells and open moorland.

In a similarly agrarian society, though in a very different part of the world, over two and half centuries ago, the serious matter of raising sheep provided the prophet Ezekiel with rich, natural and appropriate imagery for the relationship between Yahweh and the people of Israel: 'I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep ... says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed ... '

Other Old Testament writers borrowed the same imagery. Think, for example, of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm: 'The Lord is my Shepherd ... ' It's very clear, therefore, that when Jesus himself uses this familiar imagery, he's aligning himself firmly with a strong tradition and he's making it quite clear that he's one with Yahweh.

But what follows is shocking and surprising. Shepherds may go to extreme lengths to care for their flock, even to the point of putting themselves in danger, as Jesus himself makes perfectly clear, but they don't lay down their lives for the sheep. This is something new, never anticipated by Ezekiel or any of the other Old Testament writers. What are we to make of it?

Part of the answer, I think, is that we can see the early church, for which John wrote his gospel, looking back over Jesus's life and words and trying to make some meaningful connections. In particular, how could they relate Jesus's teaching about himself and his relationship to us in terms of a shepherd caring for sheep with all that had happened on the cross – his execution and then life-transforming resurrection?

Despite the joy and hope that they now experienced, the significance of Jesus's death on the cross was difficult to understand. Such an execution seemed to be a sign of failure, shame and disgrace. Did Jesus's teaching about laying down his life for the sheep hold clues for a different understanding of it?

Quite naturally, perhaps, they still tried to explain the meaning of the nature of Jesus's death and then his resurrection by using the only conventions and reasoning that seemed to make sense to them, and which rang bells in with their experience. Jesus's description of himself as the 'good' shepherd provided a helpful clue.

The word translated here as 'good' also carried with it the notion of nobility and the very opposite of disgrace or shame – and in our passage from St John, we see Jesus deliberately linking these ideas with his death. A noble or ideal death was one that, for example, soldiers might aspire to. There was a strong tradition, for example, in ancient Greece that soldiers might embrace such a death if they did so voluntarily and on behalf of others – of their city or fellow Greeks. Such a death could be seen as 'good', using exactly the same word that Jesus uses of himself as shepherd.

John, therefore, issues a straight rebuttal that Jesus's death was, as Saint Paul put it, the 'foolishness' as seen by the Greeks to whom he wrote, or as the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, put it, 'shameful' ('Jesus endured the cross, disregarding its shame'). Instead, it was good, noble and ideal, if indeed, still deeply puzzling.

The seeds were sown in the New Testament for a debate that would rumble on for centuries. It would reach a peak in many remarkable and complex theological writings in the early middle ages as Christians continued to struggle to explain why Jesus had to die, and in such an apparently abhorrent way, in such human terms that they could relate to and begin to understand.

It's an exercise that still continues and in almost every way it's doomed to failure. We just can't use human logic to explain the cross. The full extent of God's love always lies beyond our understanding. All we can really do is to feel it and to embrace the transformation that the resurrection brings, including the deep conviction that somehow this event allows us to start again and to put all those things about which we're rightly sorry and ashamed – or sins - behind us.

Every farmer will tell you that sheep are not as silly and stupid as so many people assume them to be, but they have, thank goodness, especially given our reason for breeding them, mental limitations. They can't grasp the bigger picture. Nor, if we're honest can we, though unlike sheep, it's very much in our God-given nature to try to make the big connections.

There's a serious lesson here for us: sometimes we just have to accept that we are creatures. We are not God. Let's keep asking questions - of course we must, but we won't always get the answers that make human sense – and that starts with the cross. What God has done there offers us a peace, hope and joy that passes all understanding. God gives us life – and in abundant richness. We need to accept it and live it.