

The Good Shepherd, and the Risen Jesus

John 10²²⁻³⁰

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We are just three weeks on from Easter, still acting out, as at this time every year, the same timing as that of the original events that we're following in the life of Jesus and his disciples, with a view to getting a little closer to it all, and letting it reach us a little more deeply, by doing so; in particular, imagining how it was for the disciples at this stage, three weeks after that great crisis leading up to Jesus' death. They must have been wondering intensely, in the words (slightly altered) of Donald Trump, "What the . . . is going on?" What they had gone through a few weeks earlier would never be erased from their memories. But over the days since then, the most unlikely thing possible, Jesus had been appearing again, in different situations, sometimes coming and going in unusual ways, occasional rather than continuous, with none of the public ministry or controversy of the earlier years, sometimes not immediately recognised, but still the Jesus they knew so well, meeting them individually and in various small or larger groups, walking with them, preparing and sharing meals, engaging with them in ways that could not possibly have been imagined or faked, least of all with them of all people. That continued for several more weeks, and then there was a further change, what they called the Ascension. That all left the first Christians completely certain that Jesus was alive, and after the Ascension in a new and permanent manner, not requiring even his occasional physical presence, in which he was now able to be present with them and all people, all the time. That changed them radically, far more even than their daily companionship with Jesus had done over the previous intensive three years. That's the experience that our pacing ourselves through this period between Easter and Pentecost is intended to help us appreciate and open ourselves to. By the time the gospels were written the first Christians had put all this to the proof by long personal experience, and we are invited to let the same happen in our lives as we re-visit the events in this way year by year. The message and claim of the Christian gospel is that, in whatever ways and however much or little a person understands what is called God, human life is meant to be lived in a relationship with the risen Jesus that is real, practical and transformative.

What kind of a relationship? Of all the different ways in which the people of the Old Testament tried to understand and learn about God, tribal ruler, war-lord, law-giver and others, one image of God that never changed over the centuries but was held on to and developed because it was as true and understandable in a primitive as in a more developed society, was that of God as the Shepherd. And so we have the 23rd Psalm, The Lord is my Shepherd, with its truths treasured and proved by people over thousands of years, and in the book of Ezekiel an even fuller, detailed and wonderfully developed picture of what this idea of a shepherd-relationship consists of, as well as many other shepherd-references and examples throughout the Old Testament. And today's gospel is part of a large block of teaching where Jesus states quite explicitly – this is me. I am the Good Shepherd, I am the Gate of the sheepfold. I am everything that can be included and imagined in that idea of the best possible relationship between sheep and a shepherd; and I am as committed to that as a shepherd who is prepared to die for his sheep. I value you that much. In the relationship you have with me you will get the provision, protection, guidance, leadership, fulfilment, security and everything else that a good shepherd gives, which you need, and for which you are designed. Plus, two other things Jesus said in the same context – First: specifically, "I and the father are one", and that little coded phrase that Jewish hearers would instantly understand as coming only from God when used in this way – "I am". So, in "The Lord is my shepherd" and "I am the good shepherd" – it is God, in both cases. (One of the special riches of St John's gospel – Jesus' "I am" sayings). And second, a point Jesus was keen to drive home to those around who had made up their minds to resist him: In a shepherd-relationship, sheep recognise and respond to the voice of the shepherd, and you have both the capacity and the responsibility to recognise who I am. The greatest faculty that people have is to recognise, assess and relate to another person, and so I have come to you as a person, and there is no better evidence. Consider me, and form an honest judgement, and be prepared to follow it, just like sheep do in recognising their shepherd. That was the challenge Jesus put to people then, and it is the same today.

Wonderful and true though that Good Shepherd image is, and although Jesus uses it to the full, it is not of course the end of the story: only the beginning, because it is picture-language, and like all picture-language it only goes so far. We are meant to go on from that to the real thing – Jesus doesn't say to his followers, you are sheep, he says you are my friends. He relates to us as people, whatever our age and stage in life. That is the relationship the disciples knew, and wonderful though that must have been, he led them on, as we have been considering, through those weeks after Easter, to a relationship beyond that, beyond his death, better, more lasting, more available, and more powerful and beneficial in its effect in their lives. In the three years of his earthly ministry, the disciples were always, naturally enough, in a dependent relationship with Jesus, always playing second fiddle. It was after the Ascension that they really grew up and blossomed into full adult status and capability, in their relationship with the risen Jesus. That is the relationship offered to us and to all other people now, as it has been since then. It's a relationship with a person, using the capacities we have as people for personal relationships, though in a different way, real and effective even though Jesus' presence is not physical. It's a better personal relationship than any other, but it doesn't dominate or impede our own authentic growth and independence, as can happen in an ordinary relationship, in fact quite the opposite. One is never alone, and the interplay of conversation can take place at any time. And yet of course we often are on our own, and always as fallible as ever. And somehow that mix – aloneness, individuality, responsibilities and the companionship of Jesus – is what enables people to be at their best. The relationship with the risen Jesus is in one sense 'inside' each of us, yet we are not merged with him, and it feeds the growth of our individuality and potential. As they found in those early days, he may seem to come and go unexpectedly, and we may not always recognise him. I certainly can't understand everything about him and he doesn't always explain himself. It's a relationship now, not just with a young unmarried man from a strange remote time in history, but with Jesus who is completely contemporary, and has lived with people in every imaginable human condition and situation.

What is this relationship for? The shepherd image is a good help in answering this question, but again the picture-language only takes us so far – an ordinary shepherd, however good, is concerned ultimately with market-prices. Our Good Shepherd wants the sheep to thrive, to be kept safe, to cope with the terrain, and not to get lost. Jesus gave that other wonderful picture of the shepherd searching tirelessly for the lost sheep, and he said in today's reading and elsewhere, I'm not going to lose them: I guess many of us can take comfort from that, when we think about someone we love who may seem to be lost. Without him, the sheep will not find the right pasture, they will be picked off by predators, and they will be scattered and isolated. This is no criticism of sheep, it is just how sheep are. To succeed, they need to be in relationship with a shepherd. The same applies to people as we draw the comparison with ourselves and the 'terrain' or environment in which we live – think of our own personal circumstances, our families, neighbourhoods or places of work or leisure, our local communities, the situations facing our and other nations – the politics, the issues of migration, security, justice, the European Union, the future of the planet – where the issues and risks are comparable to those of dangerous wild mountain terrain where sheep live. Those situations are our natural environment as human beings, individually and in our communities, to live in, address and handle; and God's plan is that we should do that successfully. But to do that we need to be at our best. The film "*Shaun the Sheep Movie*" takes up the idea of macho sheep who decide, because their shepherd is more like the hired hand that Jesus contrasts himself with, to take things into their own hands and manage without a shepherd, and it can be a very funny and entertaining commentary on what we have been thinking about. When individuals and communities strive to be macho, self-contained, and not needing God, it is equally contrary to our design, especially as unlike the sheep in the film, we have a Good Shepherd, they are not at their best and it is often far from funny; one modern writer calls it (with the wording again slightly amended) the Universal Human Tendency To Foul Things Up*. A phrase for it often used in the Bible is sheep without a shepherd. As we look around in the issues and situations I've just listed, there are plenty of examples of people behaving as sheep without a shepherd. People are at their best – in wisdom, responsibility, love, security, initiative, strength, staying power, courage and the other qualities that contribute to mature adulthood, what St Paul

described as the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ – in the personal relationship we are uniquely designed for, with the risen Jesus.

Let's use the rest of this Easter-Pentecost season to stay with this question of what the first disciples were learning at this time, and to let it go a bit further, in our own lives and in our churches. Wherever that leads, and for however long or hard we have been at it up to now, it will be for the better.

*"Unapologetic", by Francis Spufford, 2012.

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