

Call to Worship

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

Welcome to this reflection for the Fourth Sunday of the Easter season. Today we hear about sheep and shepherds and their importance in the economic life of communities past and present.

Let us pray:

Opening Prayer

Risen Christ,
faithful shepherd of your Father's sheep:
teach us to hear your voice
and to follow your command,
that all your people may be gathered into one flock,
to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Additional Collects - Common Worship, Church of England

When you travel around this country I'm sure you, like me, are often surprised by the enormous churches that you sometimes see in tiny villages. Just down the M5 in the Cotswolds there are good examples. St Peter's, Winchcombe and SS Peter and Paul, Northleach are good examples. Both date mainly from the 15th century and are impressive structures inside and out. When they were built they would have been able to hold the population of their parishes several times over.

Why was there so much money around to build these stunningly large buildings? Why was that happening not only in the Cotswolds but in East Anglia, Yorkshire, and up and down the land?

The answer is wool. Lots of it. And you don't have to go far to find its legacy.

St Nicolas', Kings Norton, dates from the 13th Century and its spire was added in the 15th century. Those were the centuries in which the English wool trade boomed. It was in demand across Europe. Traders travelled from as far away as Florence in Italy to buy wool. The looms of Bruges, Ghent, and Ypres also had an insatiable appetite for English wool. Everyone who had land, from peasants to lords, raised sheep. Wool was described as "the jewel in the realm". Even today the Lord Speaker of the House of Lords sits on the Woolsack, a tradition started in the reign of Edward III. Wool was the symbol of the nation's wealth. There's even more evidence of it here in Kings Norton. The building now known as The Saracen's Head was built originally as a wool merchants house. He new where to build it - right in the market square - now The Green - where he could ply his trade. In fine buildings like The Saracen's Head, the nearby Grammar School and St Nicolas Church we still enjoy the legacy of the medieval wool trade.

The humble sheep has been the life blood of the economy in many other places too since pre-history. The imagery of sheep and shepherds runs throughout the Bible, especially in the Old Testament.

Psalm 23 (NRSV)

- 1 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures;
 he leads me beside still waters;
 3 he restores my soul.
 He leads me in right paths
 for his name's sake.
 4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
 I fear no evil;
 for you are with me;
 your rod and your staff— they comfort me.
 5 You prepare a table before me
 in the presence of my enemies;
 you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
 and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

From the very beginning of the Jewish scriptures sheep are centre stage. The writer of Genesis describes Adam and Eve's younger son, Abel, as "a keeper of sheep". The theme continues. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Jacob's sons, Moses and David, the shepherd-king, are all shepherds. Sheep are at the heart of the the Jewish religious life of the day where they were sacrificial offerings in the Temple. John's Gospel picks up on the theme by portraying Jesus sacrificed as The Lamb of God.

As well as beingsacrificial offerings, sheep provided meat, milk, wool, fat, skins and horn. Almost the whole animal was used. Just like medieval England, sheep and those who tended them, were at the heart of the economy.

Sheep in Jesus' day needed considerable care and attention. They could roam off and get lost, they could be stolen, they could fall prey to lions, bears and wolves. If sheep faced danger so too did shepherds. And if the shepherd also owned the sheep they would go to extraordinary lengths to protect the sheep. A hired hand might not be quite as dedicated.

John 10 .11 - 18 (NRSV)

*A video presentation of today's Gospel from the Revd Phil Summers
 (Perfect Little Gentleman' on YouTube): <https://youtu.be/CkIXXgNwi4c>*

11 (Jesus said,) 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. 17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.'

Note the distinction in that passage between the owner-shepherd who owns the sheep and will go to extraordinary lengths to protect them, and the hireling-shepherd whose commitment is somewhat less. The owner-shepherd has their whole life invested in the flock, every single one is precious to them and worth taking a risk for. But not only them, the protection offered extends to those sheep that have maybe wandered off from elsewhere. They too can receive the protection of the good shepherd.

Why do we have this passage today, in the Easter season? It starts with Christmas! In being born as Jesus Christ at Bethlehem God is prepared to risk all for his sheep - us. In Jesus Christ he, like the Good Shepherd, is also prepared to lay down his life for his sheep - us.

Even death can't separate us from the love of God because God in Christ walks with us. In our good times and bad. In life and in death.

Never look at a sheep in the same light again.

Pages of Life

Jesus,
as each new day begins
you quietly turn the pages of life with us -
never intruding or imposing,
and I like that.

You walk beside us, not striding ahead,
nor silently in the shadows,
but linking arms, stepping out together.

And whether we walk in rugged moorland,
lush green valleys, or desolate places,
you are there, sharing our joys and sorrows.

Like a good shepherd, you will look out for us,
guiding us to rest in stillness
and find in deep, deep, peace
that your loving spirit is closer than breathing.

Thank you!

Amen.

Hazel McCorricken
in Conversations, URC Prayer Handbook 2021

Thank you for being part of this reflection today. There's a written version on the website which you can pass onto those without internet access.

Wherever you are, whatever you're doing, stay safe, take care and remember that the best of all is that God is with us!