



The Shepherd's Life

When's the last time you found yourself close to a real live sheep? For most of us city-dwellers, I suspect the answer is at best quite a long time ago; unless, inspired by our annual Palm Sunday visit from Larry the donkey, you've been along to see him and his friends at Hackney City Farm. Or perhaps like a couple here at St James's, you've recently spent had a short country break. It's easy here in the heart of the West End, to lose sight of the fact that we're now in the midst of lambing season. That's unless you're one of the 76,500 thousand Twitter followers of Lake District shepherd, James Rebanks.

He's a fascinating man who is passionately committed to the rural farming life that has sustained his family for over 600 years. The surprise success of his Twitter account and his passion for sheep farming attracted a bidding war between several publishers. Rebanks' book, *The Shepherd's Life*, which came out last year went on to become the Sunday Times Number One bestseller. It's since been made into a play, currently running in the Lake District and is highlighted in yesterday's Guardian "Five of the Best" theatre listings. Lyn Gardner writes, "It's been transposed to the stage with care, imagination (sheep and dogs are delightful puppets), and a community cast alongside professional actors. An absence of slickness is part of its charm."

All the more surprising given that Rebanks was a disaster at school. He hated it, having known since he was little that farming was all he wanted to do, and left at 16 with 2 GCSE's (religious studies and woodwork), deemed to have learning difficulties. It was through a cache of books left to the family by his maternal grandmother that he discovered a love of literature and went to Oxford in his mid-20's to study for a history degree. He got a First, but emerged with a strong sense that the rest of society looked down on the rural community from which he had come, and to which he was so keen to return.

Rebanks reflected on this societal attitude in a newspaper interview: "When the modern media

meet us, the temptation is to go for the joke and write about these crazy people who love sheep," he says. ". . . But sheep farming is just another form of culture, no dafter than anything else, and as interesting as being into Picassos or Rembrandts or 1970s punk music. You don't generally laugh at people for being interested in those things, and to me it's just the same. I'm precious about it, and see it as being every bit as intellectually interesting and culturally significant, so I'm resistant to the joke."¹

It's an interesting and highly valid viewpoint through which to consider our readings today, rich with what we usually think of as pastoral imagery, including more than one reference to Christ as the good shepherd. We've sung the hymn version of Psalm 23 – The King of Love my Shepherd is – surely the most well-known of all psalms mostly because of its frequent appearance at funerals. We've heard in John's Gospel Jesus talking of how his sheep hear and recognise his voice and enjoy his protection and care.

I suspect a lot of us don't really know much more about the context of Jesus' culture than we do that of the Lake District today. On the surface level, it may seem appropriate to hear these passages in the midst of the lambing season, but what many don't realise is that in Jesus' day the metaphor of shepherd was not simply pastoral but also political, for the image of the shepherd was "a powerful Messianic imagery in Israel's collective memory."² Certainly on closer reading the 23rd Psalm is as much political as pastoral. If we think of the first person voice in which it is written as the voice of Israel, then it talks of God providing for the people's needs, guiding and protecting them and providing a place of safety and nurture when enemies threaten.

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<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/mar/27/james-rebanks-twiters-favourite-shepherd>

² Joseph A Bessler in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide* by David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor eds.; Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, Kindle location 15799

Of course, it's not certain exactly who is the first person speaking in the psalm, which leads to a whole host of possibilities. John B Rogers notes that it comes immediately after the Psalm 22 (obviously!), but interestingly that's the psalm most commonly heard on Good Friday, which begins, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Rogers suggests Psalm 23 may therefore be seen as "the Son's own filial gratitude to the Father who brought him through the darkness of death and hell."³

In the context of funerals, and also in these weeks of Eastertide, we recognise in the psalm the character of Christ, who not only cares for us in the midst of life but accompanies us through the darkness of death and goes ahead of us to prepare a dwelling place in God's kingdom.

There are many people who are uncomfortable with the image of God as the shepherd and us as the sheep, but it's important to remember that this is an image, a metaphor. For me, at the heart of our Gospel passage in John is the question of identity and belonging. In both Jesus day and today, sheep soon learn to recognise their shepherd and his or her distinctive voice or call. Similarly, a good shepherd will know his or her flock and will be able to distinguish between bleats of pleasure or distress. A shepherd can walk right through a sleeping flock without a single sheep stirring, but were a stranger to try, it would most likely cause pandemonium. In Palestine today, Bedouin shepherds will bring their flocks home from various pastures during the day and often several flocks will converge around the same watering hole around dusk. When the time comes to move on, each sheep recognises the particular call of its shepherd, be it a cry, a couple of notes on a flute or a click of the tongue and despite the seeming chaos, the flocks remain complete when it's time to move as each sheep will only follow the sound of its own shepherd home.

At the beginning of services here I sometimes talk about remembering who we are and whose we are. The sheep come to trust in their shepherd through experience, they have learned that he or

she will keep them safe and seek them out if they become lost. They know the shepherd will meet their needs, not to excess, but that he or she will ensure they have sufficient.

In our culture today I wonder how much of our identity is rooted in belonging and how much in owning. If we go back to the 23rd Psalm, we find a shepherd who meets needs but not every desire. The psalmist proclaims that "surely goodness and *mercy* shall follow me all the days of my life", not goodness and *plenty* or goodness and *excess*. Those of us who have found a place to belong and a people to belong to, are especially blessed in a world where so many are lonely or isolated. Those of us who have food in our cupboards and clean water in our taps are similarly blessed.

There's a quality I find particularly attractive in people, which is rare. Here in Piccadilly we encounter all human life on a daily basis, people of many nations, cultures and languages, people from all different backgrounds and situations. The people I'm most impressed by, are those who I can only describe as simply "entirely comfortable in their own skin." It doesn't mean their lives are free of pain or trouble or sorrow, but rather that they have come through it with a sure sense of who they are and are at peace with themselves.

Invariably, these people don't have massive wealth or live lives of excess, and without exception, they are the first to reach out to others in need and show a generosity of spirit. They have a quiet confidence that doesn't need proclaiming, coupled with a humility that shines through. They are people who are entirely without guile. They are invariably people who are no stranger to sacrifice and who often go the extra mile for others. They are people I suspect, like James Rebanks, who will never be millionaires, but who live lives of great value, who know that they are bound to something way beyond their own selves. I'm delighted his book has been such a success, as on average Lake District shepherds make £8,500 pounds a year, and so need to find other work to support their farming.

Some final words of wisdom from James Rebanks:

"I like the idea that people lead lives devoted to something bigger than themselves – the

³ John B Rogers in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide* by David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor eds.; Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, Kindle location 15403

landscape, the flocks and their continuation. Somebody like my father wouldn't have thought his life was particularly meaningful or significant in its own right, but he saw himself as part of a community and way of life and tradition. I deeply admire that in an age when most things are about the individual and about instant gratification and consumption . . .⁴

I farm in the Lake District. And I write books . . .
This is my life. I want no other."

Or, in the words of the psalmist:
The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.

Amen.

Lindsay Meader

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<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/mar/27/james-rebanks-tweets-favourite-shepherd>