



Earth Day: The Good Shepherd, the Mad Farmer, and the Pope

Julie and I were in the Faroe Islands in the days after Easter. We went seeking solace, prayer space, and retreat from everyday work. We have a friend from theological college who lives in the Faroes. He organised for us five days of morning and evening prayer in the local Brethren and Lutheran churches, shared meals, and silent walks in nature.

We were in a part of the Faroes, above the 62nd parallel, which lines up with the tip of Greenland, and the northern parts of the Canadian provinces. It's north, it's cold, it's sparsely populated. But the churches speak of a Christian presence going back to the IXth century. Before that, the Faroe Islands were uninhabited wilderness. And today, not much has changed.

About the only thing the Faroes promises is wide open natural spaces with no one but some very hardy sheep as far as the eye can see. A bit different from central London. And if nature and thin places are your thing, then the Faroes is your place.

On one of our walks, Julie and I had an entire island to ourselves: we spent eight hours walking the island alone. It only takes three or hours to reach the highest peak and walk around the whole island. But the boat stops by only once in the morning, and then again late in the afternoon.

On day three of our stay, our friend took us to another remote corner of the Faroes for our nature walk. The place is called Saksun, and must be one of the most beautiful spots on earth. I believe the name means "the ending sun," or something like, "land's end." And it's hard to imagine anything more majestic. It is a natural, half-moon fold at the foot of a fjord, nestling a village of fourteen inhabitants in five cottages set around a deep, blue lagoon. The whole landscape was snow covered and, for us, anyway, reassuringly silent.

That said, and as isolated as Saksun may be, the village has apparently become known for its

resident, very-bad tempered sheep farmer. A man in his thirties, who evidently, didn't plan to, but unexpectedly inherited the farm from the family. Farm is a bit of misnomer. What he inherited was a cottage, hundreds sheep of a local breed, and the rights for grazing his sheep freely and as they please on three surrounding mountains. Our friend had warned us, "If we see the local farmer, don't look in his direction, stay on the public footpath. And whatever you do, don't let him see you taking pictures." I'll come back to this farmer in a moment, and to this snow-covered corner of creation.

At the heart of today's Gospel text, the Good Shepherd, knows how to talk to his sheep: they know his voice. We hear Jesus say to his disciples:

*I am the good shepherd.
I know my own and my own know me; ...
they hear my voice.*

As many of you will know, in Christianity, one of the earliest ways of telling the story of Jesus is through image representation of this Good Shepherd. We find these images usually carved into stones or painted walls in Christian places of burial. They survive alongside simple symbolic representations that try to amplify more difficult spiritual realities. So for example, to indicate Christ, the early believers depicted a fish. A representation of a dove was to signify the peace of heaven. An anchor was used to express the way that faith holds us and gives us strength.

The Good Shepherd depictions of Jesus in ochre and fresco painting survive on the walls of catacombs, those underground burial networks, in Rome and around parts of North Africa, where Christians, during times of persecution, worshipped secretly. In these cave paintings, Jesus is usually depicted as a youthful shepherd, no beard on his face, carrying a lamb around his neck. But one or two surviving Good Shepherd depictions shows Jesus carrying a full size ram: as if he were bearing the full weight of the human race on his shoulders.

Park that image for a moment. And let's for now go back to Saksun, that frozen corner of paradise in the Faroes.

After our afternoon of silence, we were making our way back to the boat. That's when we saw the bad-tempered farmer making his way out into the field. He was training a border collie with a group of about thirty or forty sheep. Whistling commands from a distance. Trying to coax the dog to regroup sheep that were ready to scatter at any moment. Bidding the dog to run up the hill and flank a breakaway group. Commanding him to stop and stalk other sheep, hoping to get them to move in the direction of the sheep fold. I say hoping because the whole thing was a disaster.

No matter what the farmer's whistling called for, the sheep ended up going in every direction. This went on for some time. And it only got worse. At one point, one whistle sent the dog running up the hill, then back down again for no reason. Then another whistle sent the dog running back and forth in a semi-circle, the sheep still going everywhere. But let's go back to Saksun, that corner of paradise in the Faroes ...

The dog, of course, was only doing what he was being commanded by an incompetent shepherd. If you've ever seen the highland sheep dog trials on television – as you know, Julie and I lived in Scotland for many years – those dogs are incredibly clever, sensitive, and thrive when they are led by a capable, skilled shepherd with some sense of connection to the animal.

Not this one, though. Another whistle went, and the dog cowered pitifully back to the farmer. Apparently he knew what was coming: the farmer gave the dog a terrible telling off. The only thing that stopped him was seeing that we were watching from the distance. Let's just say that, when we asked, our friend politely declined to translate the stream of choice Faroese vocabulary that followed.

Going home on the boat, our friend said that neighbouring farmers in other valleys have offered to help: they have offered to share their grazing space with his sheep, so that his flocks would have chance to be around some happy sheep. And they have offered to lend him their trained sheep dogs. I think the idea there is that a clever sheep dog could, in a week or so, train –

let's face it, this farce of a farmer – to be a nicer, gentler, more effective leader to his flock.

The obvious tension between dog, farmer, and sheep, was a stark contrast to the harmony offering itself so openly to prayer and reflection. Today, as we heard, is EARTH DAY. I can't help think how, even in the most remote corner of the planet, we simply cannot get away from the harsh reality: we live in a broken relationship between humans, fellow animal life, and the earth itself: the rest of creation.

Our friend reflected on the boat: *"He's an angry farmer. He doesn't know how to talk to his animals. And here in the Faroes, even the people going out to sea know how to talk to the fish. They talk to the seals. We talk to the puffins when they fly back to their breeding grounds in the summer."*

A farmer that doesn't know how to talk to his dog. And doesn't know how to talk to his sheep. Let's face it, though: every single one of us is frail humanity: we fail, falter, and fall. We are imperfect, morally inconsistent, and make promises we know we'll never be able to keep. We do far better when we admit it. But sometimes it takes a friend to know how to talk to us, and help us face our wrong doing. Those kinds of friends, – true, faithful and straight-talking – must be difficult to find when you are the Pope, the Shepherd to Catholic Christians around the world.

And yet, that's what happened when a cardinal confronted Pope Francis with a sentence from his own Apostolic Exhortation publicised earlier this month. The cardinal was appointed to begin healing the deep gashed left by the scandal of abuse in his own church. And from this position, is said to have read back to Francis this sentence from the papal Pastoral Letter: *"the lack of a heartfelt and prayerful acknowledgment of our limitations prevents grace from working more effectively within us."*

And so Francis has faced his own moment of penance. On Wednesday, he apologised for his terribly misguided defence of a South American bishop accused of covering up abuse by an infamous paedophile priest. Recognizing the Church's indefensible and profound breach of trust is only a first step. Some will see it as too little too late. It isn't hard to understand why. But

reading the Pope's words, – and seeing his actions, – in the best possible light for a moment, it seems that the Pope was moved to show his pastoral concern for the suffering of those abused by priests, and to make an apology in public. [Summary of, and citations by, E.J. Dionne of the Washington Post]

Francis responding with a letter to the South American bishops concerned wrote: *“As far as my role, I acknowledge, and ask you to convey faithfully, that I have made grave errors in assessment and perception of the situation. ... From this time I ask forgiveness to all those that I offended and I hope to do so personally, in the following weeks, in meetings that I will hold with representatives” of those affected.*”

Is this a sign of a shepherd admitting fault and voicing to his flock, in a way they can hear, the determination of someone capable of learning from his mistakes?

Where have we been so far?

We've talked about ancient symbols of Christian faith: a fish, a dove, an anchor. About sheep desperate for a caring farmer. About thin places and silence. And on Earth Day, about broken relationships between humans and other humans; humans and God; humans and the rest of the creation.

I would like – in closing – to take you back to those ancient paintings of Jesus the Good Shepherd. To one depiction in particular. There is at least one painting that attempts to depict the fact that our passage from John's Gospel is about nothing less than life and death: 'I am the GOOD shepherd,' says Jesus, "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ... And I lay down my life for the sheep."

The painting I have in mind shows Jesus dressed in a simple shepherd's dress, the weight of a grown sheep on his shoulders, and he is surrounded by a pack of hungry wolves.

I would invite you, for a moment, to imagine, to close your eyes if you wish, and imagine:

If that were you, if you were that full-grown sheep being helped up to Jesus's shoulders, and held closely against his back: who are the

surrounding wolves? What circumstances are threatening to do you in?

Is it a fear that surrounds you? Is it something that holds you back, a fault or guilt that is your constant companion, no matter how much you try? no matter how much you pray?

And if you have that something or someone in mind, and if you can visualise those wolves that surround you, what is Jesus doing to hold you and save you?

And if you could hear his voice, how does he speak to you?

And is it a voice that comforts? Does it command? Does it correct you? Does it call you?

Does his voice call you in some way?

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