

“Sheepish”

I am a huge fan of Monty Python’s Flying Circus. I was introduced to them via their recordings and then their movie “Monty Python and the Holy Grail.” It was not until the 1980s that I was able to watch the original BBC television show. One of my favorite sketches is that about flying sheep.¹ In the sketch a businessman in suit and bowler carrying his umbrella is strolling in the country. He comes upon a local farmer who is watching his sheep (the sheep are off screen but can be heard bleating). The businessman asks why the sheep are in the trees. The farmer tells him that he believes that are nesting. He thinks they are under the misapprehension that they are birds and have the ability to fly. The problem says the farmer, is that, “They do no so much fly as plummet.” After explaining more of the odd behavior of these sheep he tells the businessman that, “The trouble is sheep are very dim.”

That is the general opinion of sheep. Whenever someone wants to call the masses of people simple and easy to persuade he refers to us as sheep. When someone is called sheepish it means they “resemble a sheep being meek, timid or stupid or affected by or showing embarrassment caused by consciousness of a fault” e.g. a sheepish grin.² However a parishioner sent me an article recently that belied much of the negative impressions of sheep.

This article, by a shepherd, shared information about the qualities of sheep. One of those is their intelligence. “They have very impressive cognitive ability and just like humans, they form deep and lasting bonds with each other, they stick up for one another in fights, and they grieve when they lose a friend. They experience all of the same emotions that we do including fear, joy, boredom, anger and happiness to name a few.”³ They also have good memories. Sheep are far from being the dunce of the barnyard.

I should also point out that despite the sermons you might have heard to contrary shepherds were not the scum of the earth in First Century Palestine. Many great Jewish leaders were shepherds including Moses and David. God calls the Divine self a shepherd of the people, and in this case Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd. If shepherds were really such terrible people Jesus and God would not compare themselves to them. Indeed, shepherds were trusted members of the community. They helped supply the community with wool and food. It might have been a dirty job, but that did not make the shepherd bad. Indeed, most jobs in an agrarian culture are dirty.

When Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd and his followers his flock there is no denigration meant to either of the parties. When Jesus says that “I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know

¹ <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2v9uxz> accessed April 24, 2021

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sheepish> accessed April 24, 2021

³ <https://www.lighthousefarmsanctuary.org/post/5-amazing-facts-about-sheep> accessed April 24, 2021

the Father.” Jesus is reminding his agrarian audience that sheep know their shepherd and intimately. Indeed, the common practice of the day was to pen multiple flocks of sheep in one sheepfold for the night. In the morning the shepherds would stand outside the pen and call their sheep to them. This would only have been a practice if the shepherd knew he would not lose his precious sheep to another shepherd. The sheep know the shepherd as closely as Jesus knows the Father. Both will follow only their true shepherd.

Jesus also points out “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.” Here the metaphor breaks down a little bit. It is not that Jesus is in the sheep rustling business. Rather, there are sheep, think Gentiles, who listen to the wrong voice. At some point those sheep will hear the true voice of Jesus and follow him.

As it says in Psalm 95 “For he is our God and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand. / Oh, that today you would harken to his voice.”⁴ This is a relationship of truth and trust. We are God’s flock not because we are stupid like sheep, but because we are smart like sheep. Like sheep we follow the shepherd, we are not prodded along like cattle which must be driven from behind. We know the voice of the one who leads us. We can discern that voice from the many others that cry out for our attention.

However, like sheep we can go astray. That is why the shepherd’s rod and staff are important. Those tools of the shepherd bring us back into the fold. The help nudge us back among those who love us and whom we love. And if one of us goes too far astray, the Good shepherd will let the other ninety-nine fend for themselves while he goes off to find us. Each and every sheep is precious to the Good Shepherd.

Never let it be said that sheep are dim and the shepherd is rotten. Neither is true. There is nothing better than to be one of the sheep of this shepherd’s flock. There is security and love with the Good Shepherd in the lead. Listen for his voice. It may be hard to discern amidst the clamor of the world, but it is there. You will know it when you hear it for it is filled with truth and love and that voice will never lie to you or let you down. He revives our soul / and guides us along right pathways for his Name’s sake... Surely God’s goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives, / and we will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

⁴ Psalm 95:7 Book of Common Prayer page 725