

## *Shepherds in the field abiding*

*Shepherds, in the field abiding, watching o'er your flocks by night, God with man is now residing; yonder shines the infant light:*

Our image of modern farming differs from Biblical times but the essential role of the shepherds has not changed much through time. Unlike goats, which are quite independent and adaptable animals, sheep by and large depend upon the shepherd to find the water and pasture they need to live. If the Bible is full of Angels it is also full of shepherds. David, long before he became King of Israel, was a shepherd. He tended his father's flock on the hills outside Bethlehem defending them against wolves and bears. Traditionally, the words of Psalm 23 are attributed to David who understood the relationship between God and humankind as God the shepherd tending the sheep.

The prophet Isaiah extends this image, with a wonderful picture of the love and tenderness shown by the shepherd to his flock, who:

*will feed his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in his arms,  
and carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead the mother sheep.*

Micah, likely writing at the same time as Isaiah, pictures the remnant of Israel, who have survived all the various calamities following their wandering away from God like sheep living alone in a forest, and requests that Israel's Good Shepherd might restore their former years of blessing.

Even St Paul, a truly urban disciple, recalling the words of the prophets, used the image of the shepherd when writing to his flock in Ephesus. He warns Ephesian elders to care for the flock that God has called them to shepherd, particularly as he knows wolves, opposition from outside and incorrect teaching from within, would be gathering to pounce after he leaves. Paul's primary concern is the ordinary people, the sheep who he has nurtured.

Since the basic task of the shepherd is to feed, water and protect their flock, leading them to fresh pasture when needed then it makes sense to see this as an image of God's love, care and provision for his people.

In John's Gospel Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd, and in Greek the word used is 'kalos' which expresses itself as a loveliness and graciousness to others. *'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 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.'*

Of course you, me, the people, the flock, are sometimes pictured with a tendency to wander like wayward sheep. If God's flock in the past was so easily tempted into wandering. I wonder is it any different for us today? Who are our shepherds, caring and protecting us from the dangers, providing for us God's love and care? Or are we the shepherds called to care for others?

After the resurrection, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. What he's asking is whether Peter is prepared to give up again his life as a fisherman, abandon any hopes of a successful career and the comforts of life, in order to commit to the nurture and care of Jesus' followers – to shepherd the sheep and lambs of Jesus's flock, to be willing to give his life for them if necessary. Only when Jesus is sure that Peter means what he says, does he respond, 'Follow me!'

Shepherds along with angels are part of our nativity picture visiting and paying their respects to Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus. Then as now, shepherds are pretty much at the bottom of the social ladder yet they are chosen to receive the message of the Messiah's birth. They are entertained by an angelic choir proclaiming God's glory much as we saw last week in Isaiah's vision. More than that the shepherds are tasked with spreading the word of Jesus birth and its' importance for the world.

Shepherds are unlikely messengers for God. Yet, *They told everyone they met what the angels had said about this child. All who heard the shepherds were impressed. [Luke 2.18]*