

Homily 4th Sunday Easter B: The Good Shepherd 2021

Sheep have abounded in the Holy Land for centuries. In Biblical times Jews were first shepherds and then farmers. The youngest boy in the family often became the shepherd c.f. King David. Shepherds dressed in cotton tunics, a leather girdle with an outer garment (*aba*) often of camel's hair (John the Baptist). The shepherd's rod is like a policeman's club (often of oak) and used for protection. The *sceptre* used by kings of the East had its origin in the *shepherds rod*. Being 5/6ft long it was a walking-stick, used to handle the sheep and for protection. They used a sling to keep the sheep together and often carried a flute. The shepherd provided food and water for his flock throughout the year, often stationing them near water. They could also build a shelter of tangled thorn bushes or rude bowers and often slept with their flocks. Kings were considered to be shepherds of their people. Being unable to observe the sabbath, shepherds were frowned upon by the spiritual leaders despite being essential to the life of the community.

Most of us have never looked after sheep but like playful and energetic lambs. The majority of sheep we see, however, are either sitting down or eating. The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is both endearing and reassuring. The description of a shepherd gives us good reasons why. Shepherds show unselfish love and care for their sheep. They guard, protect and feed them. They don't interfere with their lives except to help and guide them into staying together and out of harm's way. For us, however, it is the Shepherd's love that is the key and the fact that he will do anything even sacrificing his life for us, which he did. Made in the image of God, we share in this concept of the Good Shepherd which is another reason why the image is so important; we, too, care for, protect and safeguard those we love and will do anything for them including sacrificing our lives for them. Mothers and Fathers have done this from the beginning of time and the Good Shepherd reminds us that he is both a mother and a father to us all wrapped up in one.

While on retreat on Caldey Island, walking through the fields, I came across a sheep rolled over on its back with its feet straight up in the air. It had a heavy coat of wool and was unable to roll back over. With great effort and much struggling, I managed to roll the sheep over and stand it up. Standing back pleased with what I had done, as I looked, it slowly rolled back over with its feet sticking back up in the air. The farmer told me I should have held the sheep up on its feet and kept it there for a while because the blood had drained from its legs and needed time to start flowing again. The lesson I learnt was that a good shepherd needed to help/hold people up long enough for grace to work and then to let them go, just as parents eventually need to do with their children.

Where do sheep get their hair cut?

The baa, baa shop.

I was suddenly surrounded by a flock of sheep!

It was... a lambush!!!

What do you call a flock of sheep tumbling down a hill?

A lambslide!!!

I was attacked by a flock of sheep and was sent to the hospital... Luckily, I was only grazed!