

John 10:11. I am the Good Shepherd

My friends gave me this book, and I began to read it with that sense of obligation you feel towards a gift from good friends, but with that sense of resignation you feel when confronted with a book and you find yourself registering the number of pages so that you know how far you still have to go. Was I wrong?! This is “The Shepherd’s Life”, by James Rebanks: a year in the life of a Lake District sheep farmer. I have been a townie all my days and I know nothing about sheep: but I could not stop myself from reading bits aloud in the hope that someone was listening. It is a precious book in itself: but this morning we will use it to understand the Bible. Jesus said “I am the good shepherd”. What did he mean? Let James Rebanks be our teacher.

The shepherd’s life is a life steeped in history. *A thousand years ago we were part of a Viking trading world* is how Rebanks reflects on his genealogy; and for six hundred years his people have been sheep farmers on the Cumbrian fells. His sense of family, of living tradition is very strong: and of course what it is that binds his family to the place and to the past is the sheep: generations and generations of sheep, centuries and centuries of sheep and his family bound up with them as far back as time can see. His father’s lifetime as a shepherd is very important to Rebanks: and his old grandfather – a shepherd all his days – is his hero. When his grandfather lies dying, what is it that he brings to the bedside – he brings his grandfather’s beloved sheepdog, Ben.

There is an important beginning for us as we think of Jesus the Good Shepherd. Of course it is a symbol, a metaphor. It is not factual truth. He was a carpenter to trade: there is no hint that he ever spent a night on the hills looking after the lambs. But he is here consciously rooting himself in the tradition of his people. Who here today does not remember the opening of the 23rd Psalm? Who among the first readers of John's gospel would not immediately call to mind these very words when Jesus says "I am the Good Shepherd"? The Lord is my shepherd. It is a familiar metaphor for God throughout the Hebrew Bible, throughout the scriptures Jesus knew. Jesus recalls the shepherding of God for his people down the ages from Moses to David - both themselves actual shepherds - down the history of the people directly to himself. As they have sung *The Lord is my Shepherd*, so there is now among them one who can say *I am the Good Shepherd*.

The shepherd's life is hard work: a life of constant toil. If Marie Antoinette liked to dress up as a shepherdess it was for the fun of the thing – but she hadn't the first idea. It never stops, a shepherd's life. Summer, autumn, winter, spring. Growth to withering, lambing to maturing. Morning, noon and night. This is tough. Gathering, herding, clipping, dosing with antibiotics, feeding, castrating, burning carcasses after the foot-and-mouth epidemic – an episode which Rebanks still remembers with such horror that he can barely write about it. If your picture of the shepherd's life is of pretty lambs and pretty shepherdesses and dozing off under the summer sun then one scene from this book will awaken you to reality. He describes a visit to the knacker's yard, which was deep in piles of bloated cows and sheep, *puddles of drying blood and bile, pools of piss – like some vast panorama of animal death by Damien Hirst*. This is a life for grown-ups.

And so with Jesus. The image of the Good Shepherd does great harm if we think it means dozing off under a Palestinian sun with pretty shepherdesses and pretty lambs playing at his feet. Get rid of that romantic nonsense of a picture of Jesus. His too was a life of toil, a life of hard work and homelessness: wandering from place to place, often not knowing where he would sleep at night, wondering where his next meal was coming from. His was a life that knew the darkest side of living: the cost of human cruelty, the fickleness of human friendships, the suffering of his own body, mind and spirit. They did not like it when he said *The son of man must suffer many things and be put to death*; but that was the reality. Christian people must not paint a fantasy picture of the life of Jesus. He was wounded for our transgressions. Yes, the life of the Good Shepherd was indeed a life of perfect beauty, but it was a life lived out in the toil and tears and foulness of life at its most cruel and he was not sheltered from any of that.

The shepherd's life is a life of knowledge. To me one sheep looks just like another: but not to a fell farmer whose family for generations have been studying them and breeding them and buying and selling them, and learning all about them. James Rebanks says that farmers pore over flock books and pedigrees *all winter on dark nights*. He is an inspector as well as a breeder and he knows what makes a special animal. *I am looking for practical things like size, alertness, mobility ... but because sheep are cultural objects, almost like art, I'm looking for style and character as well.* The breed he knows best is Herdwick; and he says *I know what the perfect Herdwick sheep looks like because it struts around in my head.*

Please tell me that makes you think of Jesus. It makes you think of Jesus saying *I am the Good Shepherd. I know my sheep.* I know my sheep. I have used these words in countless sermons and I have always used them as a promise. Jesus knows you and knows your name and will not forget you. I'm sure *that* that is a legitimate comment on the words. But after reading *The Shepherd's Life* I know that that is not all that these words mean. For Jesus knows us as a Cumbrian breeder knows his flock: strengths and weaknesses: where we get it right, and where, over and over again, we get it wrong. So for the Good Shepherd to say *I know my sheep* is not only comfort and hope; it is also judgment and challenge. And he knows us not just as a Lake District Farmer who has a dream of perfection in his head, but because he is himself the one, the only one, who ever lived human life as it was meant to be lived.

The shepherd's life is a life of love. That may surprise you. Who could love a sheep? Or a flock of sheep? James Rebanks. And his father. And his grandfather. Back for six hundred years. As I said, I know nothing about sheep, and I can't imagine feeling affection for them: but this book is full of it. For all the grimness of getting the sheep through winter, for all the exhaustion of searching for lost sheep, Rebanks loves his work. He loves it so much that he left it to gain a degree at Oxford University in his late twenties – and then went right back to the sheep and the shepherding. It's not just that he loves his work. He loves the sheep. My favourite quote in the book is this: *if I had only a few days left on earth, I would spend one of them with Herdwick sheep.*

And Jesus? What does the Good Shepherd say? He says. *I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*

