

\*Good morning friends, this morning I want to explore what the images of sheep, shepherds and cornerstones might say to us about group identities and how we might wisely live together with difference.

Earlier this week I was invited to give a presentation to a party of about 30 Chinese university administrators who were visiting Reading for some professional training. I'd been asked to talk with them about Pastoral Care and, mindful of the deep cultural differences between West and East, I thought I'd go back to basics. And so, I began my presentation by introducing what a pastor was – which is, of course, someone who 'pastures' the sheep, someone who feeds them: a shepherd.

\*We began by reading Psalm 23, 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, he makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters...' and so on. I asked them to use the psalm to think about the range of things the good shepherd does (the good pastor does).

[feeds, waters, makes rest, guides, protects, comforts – also celebrates...]

We then moved from God as the ideal shepherd, through to Jesus as the good shepherd incarnate, and then on to priests as specialists called to emulate Jesus, finally on to the present idea of pastoral care.

Framing pastoral care in this way was entirely new to the group (although I suspect if I'd had a group of British administrators, because of our cultural amnesia they too might have been surprised to think about the deep roots of this idea).

\*I then asked the Chinese if they had an equivalent guiding metaphor to the shepherd – and they did: it was 'the gardener'. Often in an educational

setting, the ideal Chinese teacher is imagined to be like a diligent gardener: clearing, planting, watering, nourishing, and training the seedling-students.

Jewish-Christian Scripture certainly occasionally talks about God using gardening metaphors.

[Eden; Israel like a vine; parables of sowing seeds; wheat and tares; wicked tenants; cursing/sparing of the fig tree; St Paul once wrote ‘I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase...’]

Are the metaphors of shepherd and gardener simply equivalent? Well, that’s an interesting thought exercise to explore. What *do* these different metaphors allow us to perceive and say about God’s way with us and our way with God and others?

Though there are gardening images in scripture, I note that there aren’t that many. After all, gardening reflects a settled form of culture, but Israel’s history and self-identity has written into it significant periods of transience and movement.

\*Shepherding is a mobile culture often in competition with agriculture – for in an era before fences, flocks can trespass over fields and eat whatever they want. Naturally, there is friction (some of the tensions in modern South Sudan or in Northern Nigeria hang on such differences). Tension between farmers and herdsmen are, if you think about it, reflected in the rivalry between Cain and Abel and according to that ancient myth, it’s the pastoralist who offers a lamb in sacrifice who is thought to have higher value. The Hebrew and then Israelite people were often on the move, or at least remembered that they had once been on the move, and so they often contrasted themselves with the settled Canaanites. The great heroes

Moses and David had both been shepherds; the prophets spoke of kings and high priests in terms of being either good shepherds or bad ones. And above them all was God as the great shepherd.

Returning to that contrast between shepherd and gardener: there are interesting differences when we use the terms as social metaphors.

\*For one, sheep are (allegedly) notoriously wilful. Having known several farmers, I have seen them roll their eyes at the stupid scrapes sheep get themselves into. I doubt if any daffodil or rose bush causes quite the same anxiety or annoyance in the gardener as a wayward sheep does for the shepherd. And though I don't want to essentialise the differences between East and West, it did strike me as fascinating that when we think about caring for people, our primary metaphor of 'pastoring' focuses on individuals and their propensity to wander off; whereas the Chinese metaphor of 'gardening' focuses on a rather more static and ordered social ideal.

\*If one thing we might notice in these metaphors is that pictures of sheep and plants put different emphases on individuals and collectives; another difference we could pick out is the contrast between the shepherd and the gardener in terms of risk. Again, with due deference to those who have done battle with brambles and wrangled with rose bushes, gardening is not usually a life-threatening occupation. But shepherding might be: exposed to the elements and to wild animals, alone and far from comfort and protection. Just last week, amidst the upsurge of violence in the West Bank, a young Israeli settler shepherd was murdered in the field. And in the passage just before today's reading, Jesus is described as the 'gate' of the sheepfold, and some interpreters have commented on how a shepherd

might lie down and sleep in the entranceway of the small stone fold in which the sheep are kept for the night. Literally, the shepherd laying down his or her life for the sheep to keep them safe.

\*So, to imagine God's way with us as like a shepherd working the sheep, allows us to unpack a whole range of ideas about how we might get ourselves into scrapes and need saving; about how we might need guidance and being led to new pastures by someone who can see beyond the horizon; about being defended from attack; about life being always on the move, never fully settled. And it also enables us to think about God's nature: being alongside us, guiding us, protecting us; and especially speaking to us. The sheep in today's story have learnt to recognise and listen to the voice of the shepherd – and that idea leads us to think about how prayer is about listening to the voice of God in the heart; or how reading scripture carefully and prayerfully could involve attending to what's being said to us today afresh.

Little of what I've said, I'm sure, will be new to you. We are fairly used to this sheep and shepherd imagery. But there was something in this week's reading that made me sit up, in the way that scripture *can* sometimes interact with something current and (as I have just said) speak afresh. It was that strange almost throwaway reference, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold, I must bring them also".

\*Who are these "other sheep"? I recall one Bible study I was part of, where someone was very keen to suggest that they were aliens on other planets. But I think it more likely that the writer of John's gospel thought of the two flocks as Jewish believers and non-Jewish believers. Certainly, the first century or so of the history of the church was concerned with how Jews

and non-Jews, despite all their differences, could nevertheless form a single flock. (St Paul's, much studied letter to the Romans is in large part an attempt to square the circle of how circumcised, kosher-keeping Jewish Christians might worship alongside uncircumcised, pork-eating Greeks).

There is a temptation in the benevolent, cosy imagery of the shepherd and the flock who knows his voice, to form isolated identities: to lead us just to think about us and our God versus the rest of the world. The fact that the shepherd announces he has another flock rather undermines the sense of specialness and uniqueness.

I note that it is a well-recognised phenomenon of group identities that the goodness of finding common identity-markers can sometimes lead to the exclusion of those who don't share them. Sameness can provide security but at a cost.

\*A famous experiment took place with a class of primary school children: a quarter of them were asked, at random, to wear ribbon badges for a period of time. Nothing else was said, but when the observers returned at the end of the experiment, it was noticed that the ribbon wearing children were socialising together apart from the others.

I find in today's Gospel's reminder that the shepherd has other sheep a reminder that natural tendencies to split ourselves off from others and to emphasise our differences are not always healthy. For us today, especially, when exacerbated by the algorithms of a social media that is programmed to feed us information and news which already accords with what we believe, it is ever easier to fall into groupthink.

It doesn't take very long when exploring with university students what they feel about those who hold different opinions from them on certain political or social issues before they can refer to those who they don't agree with using 'hate-speech' and raising the topic of cancelling. We live in a culture that so values diversity and difference (and these are certainly not bad things), that paradoxically it can mean that the skills of making contact with those with whom we don't have so much in common might not come quite so easily.

And so to the image, in the reading from Acts, of Jesus as the corner stone. After the resurrection, Peter has been hauled before the Temple authorities to justify his behaviour and he picks up from the tradition the ideal of the cornerstone.

\*The word 'cornerstone' can mean one of two things. It can mean the stone that joins two walls together that are travelling perpendicular to one another. And if that's the meaning, it would seem to suggest metaphorically that Peter is describing how two groups of people who are travelling at cross purposes to one another can be united. Jesus is the one, he might be saying, who brings together people who might otherwise pass one another by, oblivious of each other.

\*But another translation of cornerstone could be 'keystone', that remarkable single stone at the top of the arch which balances two opposing sides, each of which would otherwise collapse in on itself without the other. And here we have an idea not just of two groups moving past one another, but two groups actively opposing one another: going head-to-head. Jesus, Peter might be saying, is the one who brings enemies together.

What a powerful metaphor Jesus the cornerstone might be. For like the shepherd of *two* flocks, it warns us about domesticating our ideas of God and assuming that we are always and uniquely right. It suggests instead that we can be ignorant of, or even antagonistic to, those who are different to us but who are equally precious to God. And that we can be stronger together with those who are different, that we can be more balanced when we include difference.

\*All this seems to me something we need to ponder if we are to avoid getting sucked into certain culture wars: in the church about sexuality, in wider politics the way that politicians can focus on 'wedge' issues that drive people apart.

And yet this isn't simply to duck the fact that there aren't sometimes important matters of principle to stand up for. For though we are to be cautious about dividing ourselves off from other flocks, there is one binary divide within our reading that we are warned about: that is the difference between sheep and wolves. So how do we distinguish whether the other is just a sheep of a different flock, or a wolf? Which forms of difference should we value and which should we reject? That is certainly not always an easy question to answer. But one guide might be that sheep, from whatever flock they come from, are those who know their dependence on the shepherd, who are therefore at least trying to listen and to be obedient to God, which ultimately surely brings a form of gentleness. Whereas wolves are predatory: ultimately, they pick on the weak. So, when we come to make our judgements about others who are different, perhaps in the end the only important thing is to notice how the vulnerable are treated.

*This sermon can be viewed with slides and audience participation at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PYNviN8h2iE> from 15.46.*