5 May 2019: Choral Matins
The Second Sunday after Easter
Exodus 15:1–2, 9–18, John 10:1–19
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‘On Sheep’

I tend to take a dim view of sheep. They don’t think for themselves. They take their cue from those around them. They follow meekly and blindly.

The last time I preached on sheep in this Cathedral, someone who actually knows something about them corrected me afterwards, telling me that they’re not quite as stupid as I had supposed. That could well be true. But, of course, I’m not really expressing a zoological opinion. I’m not pretending to describe real sheep. Rather, I’m referring to metaphorical sheep. I’m thinking about the sometimes sheep-like behaviour of humans.

Or, to be specific, I’m thinking of the academic species of human. Over the past few years, I’ve observed what seems to be sheep-like behaviour among academics. At first sight, this is counter-intuitive. After all, academics have the reputation—and the self-understanding—of being unusually intelligent and capable of critical reflection. We are expected to produce original thought. We are paid to devote time to thinking freely. (I should know, since I’ve just finished six months of research leave, where I was liberated to do almost nothing other than read and write. Very few other classes of people enjoy the institutional support to do such a thing.) So academics are typically critical, original, and free-thinking. We also tend to be quite individualistic, as anyone who has tried to manage academics will know. It’s not so much a case of gathering a flock as of herding cats.

Nevertheless, there is a discrepancy between this stereotype of the academic and the reality. During the Nazi period in Germany, universities were not centres of liberal, rational resistance to the prevailing Zeitgeist. Quite the contrary: the proportion of both students and professors who were members of the Nazi party was higher than that of any other social group. Indeed, the man charged with eliminating British intellectual and
cultural resistance to German occupation, after Britain had been conquered, was a professor of politics.

What should we infer from this? Was it that German academics of that period were peculiarly susceptible to nationalism and anti-semitism? Some certainly were. But I doubt that all, or even most, professorial members of the Nazi party were ideological zealots. Probably, most of them simply didn’t want their careers, or their livelihoods, or their family’s prospects threatened or damaged by non-conformity. They didn’t want to stand out awkwardly and attract hostile attention. They didn’t want their private lives disrupted. They wanted to keep their heads safely beneath the parapet. So they took the path of least resistance and joined up. They weren’t malicious. They were just prudent—or, in retrospect, weak. And so they were sheep-like.

Over the past three years or so, I think I’ve observed the same phenomenon in a number of controversies in Oxford and other British universities, starting with the Rhodes Must Fall campaign in late 2015. A majority of dons defer more or less blindly to a zealous minority, partly because they’re busy in the office and at home and don’t want to be bothered by yet another distraction, partly because they really don’t know much about the issue and don’t want to waste time finding out about it, partly because they’re aware that to associate themselves with certain views will raise eye-brows, partly because they’re junior and to associate themselves with those views might cost them their careers, and partly because most of their peers seem to be deferring too. They’re not malicious. They’re just distracted and somewhat indifferent, they’re moderately ambitious, and they want to be well thought of. As someone remarked to me recently, and sharply, the fact that academics are generally clever doesn’t stop them from being cleverly foolish. Which, when we remember that academics are sinners, too, really shouldn’t surprise us. So, like other moderate sinners, academics bend with the prevailing wind and they follow, like sheep.

So I do tend to take a dim view of sheep. And the Gospels provide my scepticism with some support. After all, you may remember from the readings during Holy Week that it was the ‘crowd’—or, in Greek, the ὄχλος—who, deferring to the chief priests and the scribes, let themselves be “persuaded” (according to Matthew 27:20) and “stirred up” (according to Mark 15:11) into hollering for Barabbas’ release and baying for Jesus’ blood. In that case, the sheep were manipulated to murder.
This morning’s second reading, however, stands as something of a correction to my critical view. For our passage from the Gospel of St John is suffused with compassion for sheep. Rather than viewing them as blind followers, it sees them as vulnerable. As children need parents, so sheep need a shepherd. And they need a shepherd whose love for them is utterly reliable, and in whose voice the tones of love are instantly recognisable. Thus Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf and runs away… because [he] does not care for the sheep” (John 10:11-13). The good shepherd “calls his own sheep by name and leads them out … and the sheep follow him because they know his voice” (10:3b, 4b).

Later in the Gospel of John, we read of Mary at the crucified Jesus’ tomb, bewildered to find his body absent. Seeing the cemetery gardener, she approaches him and says, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away’. Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’. She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni’ (which means Teacher)” (20:15b-16). Jesus had only to call Mary by name for her to recognise the distinctive tones of the Good Shepherd’s deep and trustworthy love. So she turned and followed.

The Gospel of John displays a great deal of compassion for sheep that are bewildered and lost. And so do the other Gospels. In Matthew, for example, we read that “when [Jesus] saw the crowds [the ὀχλοὶ], he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (9:36). Later on we also read the parable where Jesus likens God to a shepherd, who, upon discovering that one of his hundred sheep has gone astray, straightaway leaves the ninety-nine on the mountains and goes off to recover the one that has gone missing (18:12).

Notwithstanding this, the Gospels are not romantic about the bewildered, sheepish crowds—all those folk desperately looking at those around them in search of someone else to give them direction. For the thing about crowds is that they’re fickle. They blow one way, but, then, when the wind turns, they turn, too, and blow the other way. The harassed and helpless crowds—the ὀχλοὶ—that elicited Jesus’ compassion later became the murderous crowd—the ὀχλος—that bayed for Jesus’ blood. Sheep may be harassed and helpless, but they are also dangerously susceptible of being misled. For sometimes they don’t heed the Good Shepherd’s voice, but, instead, they yield to the
persuasion of the chief priests, or the Nazis, or anyone else who appears sure about the way forward.

The bad news is that it’s not just academics who are susceptible of being sheep-like in their gullibility. If the prophet Isaiah is to be believed, then we are all susceptible. “All we like sheep have gone astray,” Isaiah wrote, “each of us has turned to our own way” (Isaiah 53:6).

But the good news is this. That the love of the Good Shepherd, the love of Jesus, the love of the God who became incarnate in Jesus, can cope with this. It can cope with our sheep-like fickleness and betrayal. For even when we have nailed it to the cross, this love is still strong enough to say, according to Luke’s Gospel, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (23:34).