

Sermon Epiphany 2

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!'

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Although I grew up in sheep farming country, I don't think I'd make a good shepherd. This I discovered when I went to stay with a friend on his sheep farm in Wiltshire. *Why not come for lambing?* he suggested, and in my innocence I thought that kind invitation would require nothing more than wrapping feeble little lambs in blankets and warming them up by the Aga.

Never again, I thought, standing with half a dozen helpers on a freezing rain-lashed hillside at three in the morning, as Mother Nature, red in tooth and claw, went about the miracle of birth. I was unprepared for that spectacle, and stood by helplessly as newborn lambs spilled, steaming, onto the iron-hard ground. So helpless, in fact, that my host decided to give me lighter duties, ascertaining which ewes were furthest advanced in labour. *How will I know?*, I asked. *Don't worry*, he said, *you'll know*.

Soon enough I came across a ewe who looked to me the very picture of expectancy. I gave the alert, and my friend said to check at the rear to see what was happening. *Something's coming out of her*, I shouted, in alarm. *What does it look like?*, he asked; and I shouted back, *a Lalique paperweight*.

I don't think I've ever seen men in Barbours laugh harder, longer, and more scornfully than on the hillside that night. I thought it a rather brilliantly accurate description, but countrymen from Wiltshire, I'm sorry to say, seem lamentably ignorant of the great achievements of art deco glass. Fifteen years later they were still laughing about it, when I went to the pub with my friend, even though I was, by then, what I am now, a shepherd of sheep.

Different kind of shepherding, different kind of sheep; but although the New Testament, and indeed the Old, are full of pastoral imagery, I've always been a bit uncertain about it. What does a shepherd signify in Christian faith? And what do we mean by sheep?

The symbolism is actually quite complex. In today's gospel, for example, John the Baptist describes Jesus as the Lamb of God, a description repeated in the *Agnus Dei*, said and sung at every Eucharist. Its origins are in the Old Testament, and the sacrificial lamb of the Book of Exodus, an image used by St Paul to explain the significance of Jesus in the New. In ancient Israel's sacrificial system, they are efficacious in atonement, the blood of an unblemished lamb washing our sins away. This, too gory for some, is moderated in the prophecy of Isaiah, which speaks of God's suffering servant going to his fate as meekly as a lamb.

This Lamb of God appears and reappears in Christian iconography, sometimes as a lamb trussed for sacrifice – Zurbaran's almost photorealist painting of that unfortunate creature is well known – and also in church architecture and decor.

Less literal, and more common, is the depiction of the Agnus Dei as a lamb holding a cross or a victory flag. The image probably goes back to 5th century Rome, and we know that discs of wax imprinted with this symbol, were blessed by the Pope and distributed throughout the Churches. It is used to signify the Resurrection, and you will see, flashing at my wrists, that symbol on my College of the Resurrection cufflinks; those of you involved with such things will recognise it as the symbol of the Worshipful Company of Merchant Taylors; you will see it too carved over the Vicar's stall in the sanctuary; you'll see it painted on the signs for countless pubs called the Lamb and Flag; you'll see it carved on the tombstones of children, for as William Blake observed, the lamb of God stands eternally for innocence.

I would like to think that Damien Hirst, with his fabled sense of nuance and delicacy of sensibility, had all these in mind when he made the work on the front of this morning's service booklet, *Away from the Flock*. It's a lamb halved, pickled in formaldehyde, displayed in a vitrine, bought by Charles Saatchi, and is one of the herd of bisected animals with which Hirst made his reputation and fortune. *Away from the flock*, rather a poignant title, clearly exploits our feelings for the vulnerability

of a little lost lamb, but it also impresses us with its detachment, the same kind of detachment we associate with the dissecting room, the laboratory or the operating theatre. In Hirst's case I find it peculiarly callow and knowing, a paradoxical combination characteristic not only of his work but, I think, of our wider culture. Instead of being lost in the world's confusions, as the Church of England's ordination rite puts it, we have come to be at home in the world's confusions, looking without seeing, experiencing without feeling, turning little lost lambs into laboratory specimens.

But this unfortunate creature, *away from the flock*, points towards a quite different cluster of images associated with the Lamb of God, and a different kind of detachment. Again, these are more literal, illustrations, really, of the story in this morning's Gospel: John the Baptist, standing with two of his disciples sees Jesus walk by, and exclaims, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!'

One of my favourite versions of this is by Bouts the Elder, reproduced in the service booklet. It was painted in about 1470 and, typically for the period, shows John, a disciple – or is it a donor in suitably pious pose? – and Jesus dressed in fifteenth century clothing in an early Netherlandish landscape. What strikes me about this painting is not so much the anachronisms, nor the creative interpretation of Palestinian topography; it is that Jesus is walking away, heading, quite deliberately, on his dainty painted feet, out of the frame. I think this more than the painter simply illustrating what's there in the text: I think it extends the pastoral imagery of the Bible in a particular direction, away from sheep and towards shepherds.

When priests are ordained in the Church of England the Bishop charges us solemnly to be *servants and shepherds among the people to whom we are sent, to search for God's children in the wilderness of this world's temptations, and to guide them through its confusions, that they may be saved through Christ forever*. We are all, I'm sure, familiar with images of Christ the Good Shepherd; indeed one of the very few examples of Christian iconography dating from the first century is of Jesus carrying on his shoulders a lamb. Archaeologists had discovered nearly a hundred of these in frescoes in the Roman catacombs and what finer model could there be for the priestly vocation of search-and-rescue? Who of us hasn't, at some point in our lives,

longed for Jesus to haul us out of danger and onto his shoulders and to carry us away to safety? In the words of this morning's Psalm, *He brought me out of the horrible pit, out of the mire and clay, and set my feet upon the rock, and ordered my goings.*

But John the Baptist points to something strikingly different. Jesus is walking away. In Bouts' painting he is not only walking away but is fixed on something beyond sight, on something his disciples cannot see. Jesus is walking, although they don't yet realise it, the Way of the Cross, and following him will take them to their own Good Fridays. As a model for Christian ministry, then, this seems a long way from the Good Shepherd, hauling us from the mire and clay and ordering our goings; but it expresses a profound truth about Christian vocation. We don't choose the destination, and we're always moving on, abandoning our nets, like Simon and Andrew and James and John, leaving people behind, to go where God wants us to go.

A friend of mine, a priest, and a remarkably able pastor, when he's thinking of a new job, always looks for three things: it mustn't be obvious; it must involve doing something not done before; it must involve sacrifice.

When news of my appointment to be parish priest of Finedon was announced a friend of mine called and asked what had gone wrong. She assumed my next move would be to an incumbency in a smart central London parish, or something swanky in Oxbridge or at a cathedral. I did too, until, gradually, Finedon's sultry glebe and dewy meads came, surprisingly, into view. It mustn't be obvious.

I have also discovered that I am not what I thought I was: a perpetual curate. Lot to be said for being a curate: it is not me who has had to lie awake at night worrying about parish share, about matching resources to vision, about having the buck stop here, about having to say no. Not for me the leader's role, and when a bishop once asked me how I would describe my leadership style, I had to really think about it. In the end, I said *Strictly Ballroom*; but that's changed. One of the unintended consequences of having such an exceptionally fine Vicar, is that the very richness of experience and the opportunities for growth and that sheer enjoyment that Alan has

made possible for me here, lift the eyes, like John's and his disciples', to the figure passing by, who is always moving on. The minute you think you've got the hang of it, is the minute you discover it's time to go; to try to run a parish, to make your own mistakes, to do something you haven't done before.

As for sacrifice: type 'Eating Out in Finedon' into Google and you'll understand that this was no easy decision. But it will be more than Michelin stars I'll miss. I'll miss the music, the sound of heaven amid Hyde Park Corner's din; I'll miss the liturgy, a vision of eternity in this passing world; I'll certainly miss the resources our immensely able Churchwardens and generous congregations provide; most of all, I'll miss the people.

But this is not the Oscars, it's a Eucharist, where fugitive sheep and sacrificial lambs and good shepherds cohere in the person of Jesus Christ, offering himself for us so that we might have truth beyond confusion, hope beyond fear, peace beyond tribulation, life in its fullness. And so to the Eucharist belongs the last word: *Go in the peace of Christ – thanks be to God.*