

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Real Sheep

The experience of escape to the North York Moors has come my way not a few times over recent years. In that high and lonely landscape there is an awareness of the ancient, which very thinly veneers a prehistoric and palaeolithic past. On high places there will sometimes appear through the swirling mists a standing stone (*Fat Betty*, or *Ralph's Cross*, for instance) marking some half-forgotten path between invisible points of departure or arrival; these landmarks are usually named for monks and nuns, since these were guardians of the few vestigial human traces in those wilds. There is a feeling of indifference to things human up there: the moaning wind has no human edge to its voice, and the moors have the look of country that resists habitation; even the trees are obedient to its determined inhospitality, and have all abandoned the attempt to punctuate those eternal horizons. However, there is one form of life which is somehow at home there. Even in howling blizzards, or fogs so dense that you scarcely dare to move forwards, you will hear the crunching tug of the grazing sheep, hoisting in its daily portion of stringy grass with a complete indifference to its situation which counters and matches the impassivity of the moors. From time to time you will find yourself staring into a face whose lines match the stones of the dry walls, crags, and boulders of their cold world. They look at you without emotion, and there is no flicker of response in the yellow eye; when there are lambs, the ewes may shuffle away to a safe distance, but otherwise they evince no interest and little fear.

Mysterious nature

This tangential meeting with the sheep of the moors has a deep effect on me. It reminds me that forms of life are possible that are quite incomprehensible to me. How does the sheep mind cope with its appalling world - with being precipitated on by cold water almost every day, with eating cold grass in the exposed places it has to live in, with the sheer homelessness of this humped and puddly terrain? Looking into their faces I find a sort of blank wall: whatever is within is staying there! Yet I know people who claim to know the minds of sheep, and who have learned to call each one by its name, and to read character and personality (if that is the right word) into each of them.

Feed my sheep

It occurs to me to say that my attitude to sheep is not unlike the average attitude we take to our fellow-inhabitants of the human moors. Little by little we teach ourselves *not* to relate, *not* to try to penetrate the exterior appearance of the people in the street, on the

bus, in the shops. The notion that we might read the minds of the crowds of people we jostle against seems a strange one. Meanwhile, the human world grows incorrigibly lonely, dying of apartness, even where there is hardly room to squeeze in another dwelling-place. Whether we're getting profoundly indifferent to each other because we aren't interested, or think everyone is the same as us anyway, or because we feel so incapable of bridging the gulf between ourselves and others, I am not sure. I think it is beyond question that the impulse to shepherd one another, to care actively and generously, is in difficulties. Our wretched love of independence, which (when all's said) would spell the death of most sheep, will do for us as well if we don't repent of it. Jesus chose the image of the sheep to commission Peter in John's Gospel *You say you love me: look after the sheep*. In the tenth chapter he gives himself the character of the shepherd, and speaks of the shepherd's task in the highest terms: he has to *lay down his life* for the sheep: he has to *watch for the wolf*, and he has to *know* the sheep, *call* to them, and *lead them home*. I would feel far from competent on those moors, which are foreign and wild to my urban mind. But is the task of shepherding any less in this city wilderness, where so many are either cowering in fear of the wolves, or running with them? And is our own pride not standing between us and the experience of care - from others, or from the great Shepherd himself? It is worth praying about this. If we know we are lost ourselves, perhaps that is a start.

Fr Philip