

In our society which so values individualism, it is hard to listen to the words of Jesus about a flock. We have many terms of abuse that come from our obsession with selfhood; we speak contemptuously about the herd mentality and mob emotion; we liken people to sheep when they are easily led, and laugh at them when they are betrayed. Full humanity, we feel, belongs to those who can take other people or leave them; who are independent, self-reliant, and self-sufficient.

We should stop ourselves falling into this particular modern rut. Many who have espoused its imagery have ended in the lonely and impoverished state of friendlessness, inability to relate to God or to others. Life that is not shared is robbed of its meaning; a self that is never surrendered in love and generosity is a dead seed in an old packet in a dark box.

The imagery of the flock is open to many positive interpretations; and as we meditate on our Lord's words we should imagine him speaking in the presence of a flock and of a sheepfold and of a good shepherd, who is displaying some of the traits he draws to our attention.

I think he appreciated the image of the walled sheepfold where there is safety from wolves and thieves. To find a place of safety for those we care for is a prime motive in the syndrome of concerns that make up human love. The vigilant shepherd watches them in, and sees them all safe. Some have suggested that the shepherd then lies down to sleep across the gateway, so that no-one comes in or out without his knowledge; in this way he makes himself the gate of the sheepfold.

The response of the sheep to the man they trust is another element: *they hear his voice and follow him; they do not recognise the voice of strangers*. In our world, the building of trust is hedged about with every kind of brake and obstacle; in the Lincoln County Hospital the default assumption is that even the people who work there are criminals, under supervision and restriction to prevent them preying on the weakness of patients. One nurse will not divulge another nurse's telephone number, even to a colleague, lest the motives involved be "undesirable". Such is the depravity into which our concern for the individual has led us.

Jesus knows the difference between a true shepherd and a thief *who comes to steal, and kill, and destroy*. But he also knows what it is for a true shepherd to be refused and rejected. As he wept over Jerusalem he said: *Jerusalem, Jerusalem! You who kill the prophets and stone those whom God sends to you! How often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you would not!*

Let us be sure today that we are not making the world harder to save, because we refuse to be gathered into the body of the Lord, keeping our selfish apartness, instead of letting ourselves be loved and served in this community.