



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Second Sunday After Easter, April 15th, 2018

**In the Name of the Father ✠ and of the Son
and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.**

Today, the Second Sunday after Easter, is traditionally known as Good Shepherd Sunday because the Epistle and Gospel dwell upon the theme of Jesus as shepherd of his people. But when you pause to consider it, there there's something quite inappropriate about comparing Christians today with sheep.

Surely it's time for God to upgrade the metaphor. The word "sheep" might have been an entirely appropriate description for most Christians in, say, the Middle Ages. Not only were they totally illiterate except for monks and maybe the nuns, they were also utterly ignorant about personal hygiene.

Even the monks and nuns never washed. Nor did the kings and queens. Just like sheep, you must have been able to smell them a mile off. "On your knees, people. I can smell the Royal Family coming down the street."

Not one of them, not even Royalty, owned a stick of deodorant – not even one of those anti-social spray cans of Right Guard: You know, the sort spray causes Global Warming.

Come to think about it, they didn't know about Climate Change either. When the Mini-Ice Age struck in the late 14th Century, they simply thought: "Oh dear, God must be very upset with us because it's getting colder."

We are nothing like that today. Not only do we wash, we shower on a daily basis. What's more, we always use deodorant, not to mention lashings of perfume and cologne. On top of all that, we shave (well, some of us anyway), while growing numbers have taken up waxing. You simply can't get any more hygienic than that.

As for literacy, most of us can read well enough to use Facebook. Indeed, many of us can write whole sentences despite the efforts of the Department of Education. And most everyone, especially our children, are highly skilled at using computers. And "computer literate" is a term that even the monks and nuns ever dreamed of.

In short, it's high time we got away from the "sheep" metaphor. If God must use animals to describe us, he needs to find something a tad more dignified. There's no dignity in being called ants or apes, however industrious or intelligent. To use lions or tigers would be politically incorrect. They, after all, are completely "unsafe" by Facebook standards. Elephants are slow and plodding and rhinosauri have tiny bloodshot, boot button eyes.

I suppose we might get a hint as to what would be appropriate by figuring out why God called us sheep in the first place. Some

scholars say that from Abraham onwards, the Children of Israel were nomadic shepherds – dependent on their herds for everything.

Sheep-herding was so deeply ingrained in the national subconscious that by Jesus' day, more than a millennium after sheep had ceased to be their chief mainstay, the Jewish people still harked back to their nomadic origins to conjure up their image of God.

Folks who buy such theories plainly don't know much sheep: Intellectually speaking, sheep are among the most profoundly stupid creatures ever created – so stupid, in fact, they are virtually incapable of looking after themselves. Left to their own devices, they're hard put to survive, mindlessly indulging in all manner of self-destructive behavior.

For example, they appear incapable of distinguishing between foods that are good for them and plants that are likely to make them very ill. As a consequence, shepherds have to monitor the pasture on which their flocks graze to ensure they don't eat stuff that causes colic – a condition that makes them swell up and die.

Sheep also constantly wander off, getting themselves lost – a fact that explains why sheep dogs are always on the move. They are also prone to panic – so much so that one small, but noisy dog can kill an entire flock of huge, lumbering sheep by panicking them to such a degree that they die of heart attacks. Sheep, in short, are so obtuse, so obstinately stupid that only people of an infinitely patient and kindly disposition would voluntarily take care of them. Indeed, infinite patience, kindness and a strong constitution are the primary qualifications for a shepherd.

In view of the average sheep's glaring deficiencies in the intellectual department, it seems inappropriate for God to have chosen them as a metaphor for us. After all, we are the most intelligent of his creatures?

It isn't as though God was short of other livestock from which to draw his imagery – the crafty and enterprising goat; the cunning and irascible camel, the hardworking and humble donkey. Could it be God is trying to tell us something by opting for sheep?

Human history, from earliest times to today, is simply a sad cycle of short periods of moral renewal, inexorably followed by moral collapse. Today, we live an age of moral collapse. Most of people, however, seem blissfully unaware of it – perceiving our tolerance of activities our forebears considered destructive and depraved as a sign not of sinfulness, but of enlightenment.

We have taught our children that morality is merely a matter of choice. Having freed ourselves from sexual and other social inhibitions, we close our eyes to the consequences: broken and impoverished families; abused and abandoned children; and a society engulfed in a crime wave of epidemic proportions.

We shouldn't be surprised at the social disintegration. It has all happened before – time without number in fact. The Bible, and even our secular history books, record the disasters in gory detail.

The Prophet Isaiah – whose book provided this morning's Old Testament lesson – lived in times much like our own: times of deep depravity and apostasy. Heathen shrines flourished throughout the Holy Land and the people who worshipped there were Jews. Sexual license was the order of the day. Jesus came to earth in similar times.

God is paying us no compliments when he compares us to sheep. He is telling us we are utterly unqualified to run the sheep dip. Like sheep, when we seize control of our own affairs we inevitably end up in trouble. Come to think of it, perhaps it's the sheep who should be upset with God's choice of metaphor, not we humans. *AMEN*