

## Little Lamb God Bless Thee

### Lambing Service All Saints Cawthorne

Sunday 10 May 2009

It would be about five years ago now, I suppose. We were journeying home to our tiny cottage in Northumberland in our ancient long wheel-base Land Rover. Ancient though it was, it had remained amazingly reliable but that afternoon it let us down. It just petered out in a remote part of the country. Happily a shepherd came past on a farm pick-up and towed us back to his home. We telephoned the AA and after an hour and a half the breakdown man arrived. 'What's the trouble,' he asked. I said I thought it was fuel starvation. Off he went back to the cab of his vehicle and brought back a hammer. Rather concerned I watched him drop down under the Land Rover and give the petrol pump a mighty bash. He jumped into my vehicle and it started first time!

This would have been all very frustrating had it not been for the shepherd. For the hour and a half were not wasted. He took us into his home, gave us tea and cakes and then took us out into a huge barn or shed. There were dozens of sheep all *in lamb*. In the next hour we watched one ewe give birth to a tiny lamb. It was a most moving experience. This little fluffy dot of an animal would be gambolling across the fields in a day or so. One tiny woolly animal.

Of course, that's just one side of the story as they say now, the micro picture. So then on to the macro: You'll all know the farming statistics for sheep in New Zealand – far more sheep than humans. Now, the New Zealand government is becoming more than a little defensive about all this. On their web site they hasten to tell you that its nonsense to say there are twenty sheep for every person. Now the human population has risen to over four million and the sheep population has dropped to a mere forty million – *only ten sheep per person!* Over here, of course, we're a world apart. We have sixty million people and a mere thirty-three million sheep – only half a sheep each.

Now I bother with all this since it indicates the extraordinary ambivalence we show about sheep and lambs. One tiny lamb is valued – ten million are slaughtered! Two years ago, in Australia, my wife and I were being entertained by another couple. What would we eat? The two men opted for kangaroo. 'How could you?' asked our wives. They're such lovely animals. What did our wives eat? Lamb! And yet, see them as we did just now in that pen in the churchyard and they touch our hearts. So, for example, the College Valley in Northumberland is closed for lambing time. Or my youngest son, when he was little, wept countless tears as he saw the great lorry at Lairg in Scotland packed with lambs literally for the slaughter. Of course, farmers learn to live with this tension between their duty of care for the sheep and their final destination.

The Christian faith has used imagery about lambs, sheep, shepherds, staffs and crooks more than almost any other. I came in today carrying a shepherd's crook. Our first reading included that marvellous piece immortalised by Handel in *The Messiah*: 'He shall feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, carry them in his bosom and gently lead those who are with young.' The gospel reading from John is from that remarkable passage about the Good Shepherd. So here is a rich imagery showing God's care for us.

But the imagery overflows elsewhere. Last week I was taken round the Van Dyke exhibition at the Tate Gallery in London as part of some 'in service training.' We learnt much from our guide who is an art historian. So we saw Van Dyke's portrait of the beautiful Lady Mary Villiers as St Agnes. She is pictured with her hand on a sheep or lamb. The sheep is the sign of virginity – it is the sign of St Agnes (the Latin word for sheep is, of course, *agnus*) St Agnes was martyred for her faith while still a virgin.

Then, of course, that motif of innocence is also applied to God in Jesus. In the year 2000, the Millennium year, there was an amazing exhibition at the National Gallery in London of a huge range of images of Christ. The Exhibition was called interestingly *Seeing Salvation*. One of the most moving images was by the Spanish artist, Zurbaran. It was simply a picture of a 'bound lamb' and it is called *Agnus Dei*, the Lamb of God. It is, I think, one of the most powerful symbols of the suffering of Jesus and equally of God's self-offering for us. That is the reason why I have reproduced the picture for all of you here today in your service book.



Zurbaran has deliberately placed the brilliant white lamb against a dark, austere background. It intensifies the lamb's physical presence. The lamb is lying on a stone slab – an altar of sacrifice. By portraying the lamb in this way Zurbaran takes us into the heart of God, as we see him in Jesus. A lamb, frolicking and as innocent as those God blessed outside in the pen, a gentle and defenceless creature, symbolises God's offering of himself for all humanity. It touches upon Jesus' self-offering like no other images that I know.

We have in these past few minutes seen an amazing set of contrasts. The forty million sheep of New Zealand and the thirty-three million here in Britain are narrowed down to one tiny animal representing the purity and love of God given for all.

William Blake captures this classically in words you'll all know. His poem begins 'Little Lamb, who made thee?' It goes on to describe the lamb, rather like Zurbaran's picture:

'Gave thee clothing of delight,  
Softest clothing, woolly, bright;  
Gave thee such a tender voice,  
Making all the vales rejoice.'

But it is the second verse which takes us to the heart of the matter, for it answers its own question:

‘Little Lamb, who made thee?’  
‘Little Lamb, I’ll tell thee,  
Little Lamb, I’ll tell thee:

He is called by thy name,  
For he calls himself a lamb.  
He is meek and he is mild,  
He became a little child:  
I a child and thou a lamb,  
We are called by his name.

Little Lamb, God bless thee.  
Little Lamb, God bless thee.

Now, through Jesus, the lamb becomes the symbol of all humanity and in a dramatic reversal, Jesus becomes the Good Shepherd. Today’s simple but powerful service touches the heart of our faith. It reveals our God, and uncovers too the path to which we are called. We, too, are called to offer ourselves in service to others, just as Jesus the lamb of God lived for us. This too makes us shepherds, called to care for all God’s people  
Amen

#### READINGS

Isaiah 40: 9-11

John 10: 22-30