

The Fourth Sunday of Easter, 21st April 2024

The Baptism of Olanna, Indira and Aife Atfield

Reading [John 10.11-18](#)

What a moment of promise, as Olanna, Indira and Aife come to be baptised. And in this moment we hear the tenth chapter of John's gospel with Jesus' words, 'I am the good shepherd.'

Whenever you hear a piece of scripture, ask yourself: *how should this passage change me?* So what about this one?

For myself, sheep are not a big part of my life. Not live ones anyway. I did meet a few last week (plus some puffins) on a visit to Holy Island, but I am basically a townie, and if I encounter sheep it's generally by the kilo (though I am trying to do less of that). My nephew, on the other hand, grew up next to a farm.

For his third birthday he got a toy farmyard. His parents showed him the model animals one by one. 'Look,' they said, 'here's a cow.' 'Moo!' he said. 'Here's a sheep,' 'Baa!' 'and a dog,' 'Woof!' 'and here's a fox.'

'Shoot it! Shoot it!' he shouted.

A fox had killed their neighbour's hens a few nights before, and he was simply repeating the farmer's words about what to do if you meet one.

Even the green and pleasant land of the modern English countryside can be a dangerous place. Take yourself back twenty centuries to the land of the first people to hear John's gospel, and the dangers are multiplied. Jesus introduces us to two people in that perilous rural world: the shepherd and the hired hand.

The hired hand has no job security; he is part of what we'd now call the gig economy. His security lies not in protecting someone else's sheep – and probably injuring himself – but in staying safe. That way he can continue to provide for himself and those who depend upon him. So when danger comes, he does his sums and runs away, to live and work another day.

For the shepherd it is different. His security is entirely bound up with his sheep, because they belong to him. Lose them, and he – and those he provides for – lose everything. So when danger comes, he does his sums – and stays. He protects the sheep, even at risk to his own life. And, says Jesus, I am that shepherd.

How should this passage change me, you, us? First, can we see ourselves in the passage?

Do you feel you are living in a place of peril?

Yesterday's edition of [Any Questions?](#) came from King's Lynne, not the scariest place on the planet, but the first question was:

‘Has the world ever seemed more dangerous?’

The panel mentioned Ukraine and Russia; Israel, Gaza and Iran; China and Taiwan, Europe, the USA, NATO; and they could have added that we have just had the wettest 18 months and the warmest 12 months on record. All signs of a world hotting up (in the worst senses of that phrase).

Olanna, Indira and Aife, who knows what the coming decades will bring for you? All of which is very depressing – think too much like that you’d never have a family at all – and the truer judgment is that we are a quarter of the way through a century of that is as full of promise as it is full of peril.

How should this passage change me?

In a time of peril and possibility I hear an invitation to trust (or trust more) in Jesus, who says to you, to me, to our three candidates for baptism:

I am the good shepherd: you and I are so bound up together that I am willing to lay down my life for you.

And John’s gospel tells us, that comes with the voice of God, because God has taken on human flesh in Jesus, the good shepherd.

Once you know that, once you know that the One who gives warmth and meaning to the universe feels like that about *you*, then there’s a lot you can face in life, and a lot you can do. You won’t be starry-eyed about the world’s possibilities (or in despair when it lets you down) and you won’t be paralysed by its perils, because you have heard a voice that is not bound by this world.

But what do I mean by ‘voice’?

Today the Church of England keeps as [Vocations Sunday](#), a day especially to listen for the call of God, as sheep listen for the voice of their shepherd. So, what is God calling you to?

What is God calling you to if you are a parent or godparent this morning? There are some quite specific promises for you to make in a moment which spell that out – as there are undertakings for all of us, the people of God in this place.

And more widely, what is God’s calling you to in your life?

If ever you respond to what you think might be the voice of God, there is risk. For a start, can you be sure it’s God you’re hearing? It’s unlikely to be a direct message you can record on your phone; it probably feels more of a hunch: some inner pressure nudging you in a certain direction, some words of a friend that have a special weight for you.

It's a good idea to talk to someone about it. Or you can ignore it, and avoid the risk. But if you do (to return to the shepherd and the sheep) the bigger risk is to stay for ever timidly in the sheepfold: there's not much food there, and there our souls will starve.

We are always at risk, and we have to learn to value something more than immediate safety. That something is what Jesus offers. In the [verse](#) right before our reading starts he tells us what it is: he has come that people may have life, and have it abundantly.

Abundant living can be ours, if we let God nurture a certain instinct in us. What is that instinct? I can illustrate it through a story a young student once told me. He consulted his lecturer – a [Jesuit](#) priest, who was getting on a bit – about a particular opportunity facing him. Now Jesuits are famous for not giving straight answers to questions (they are much more interesting than that) and this one didn't disappoint. He said

When you reach my age and look back over your life, it is not your extravagances you regret; it's your economies.

What is God calling you to? In addition to the material for Vocations Sunday (see the link above) The Church of England website has a lot to help you explore this vital question: churchofengland.org/our-faith/your-calling