It's good to be sheep!
Christ the King, November 22 2026
Matthew 25:31–46
Very Rev Susan Brown, locum minister (with a little help from Rev Derek Brown)

Reflection

I wonder if you've ever sat down with a child on your knee and perhaps gone through a picture book of animals and pointed to each page and said things like – "What does the cow say? What does the cat say?"

Ok – so let's do this! What *does* the cow say? What does the cockerel say? What does the sheep say? What does the goat say?

Ahh… what *does* the goat say? The truth is there's not a lot of difference between what a sheep and a goat says. Going on sound alone it can be hard to tell the two apart.

And with some of the weirder sheep you get, it can sometimes be hard to tell sheep and goats apart even when you're *looking* at them!

There are though, I'm told, important differences. With apologies to any of you who have, or who have had in the past, either sheep *or* goats… this will be a bit like teaching your granny to suck eggs!

Apparently, a goat's tail goes up – while a sheep's tail hangs down. And while both species are herbivores – they both like green stuff - sheep tend to stick to *grass*, while goats will clamber up to reach leaves on trees and bushes – and occasionally your washing if it's anywhere near… More technically, goats have 60 chromosomes while sheep have only 54 – I have no idea what that means – but that's what I've read – maybe it makes sense to you!

Goats are also more independent and inquisitive than sheep - who tend to stick together and follow one another around – earning them a reputation for being, well, for being a bit dumb! Which makes you wonder about Jesus encouraging his followers (us) to find our place among the *sheep* rather than the goats!

Is Jesus suggesting he's looking for *mindless* followers? People who just tag along together behind him – leaving their minds behind?

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It's amazing what you find on the internet. I'm about to offer you, some absolute gems of sheep-related information, that may never come in useful!

Did you know, for example:

… that when sheep move with the herd, it is a survival instinct designed to *protect every*one in the herd. It's *not* a sign of a lack of intelligence - *or* identity! It's a sign of their inbuilt desire to look out for each other.

… that sheep are about as good as humans at face recognition? Sheep can interpret the emotions on the faces of other sheep and they can also *remember* those sheep's faces - over *years*! Oh… *and* they can recognise *human* faces too!

And according to a BBC report back in 2004, hungry sheep on the Yorkshire Moors taught themselves to roll 8 feet across hoof-proof cattle grids to raid nearby villagers' gardens – much to the annoyance of the villagers!

And researchers in Australia have developed a complex maze test for sheep which has shown that sheep have excellent *spatial* memory and they are also able to learn and improve on their performance – as well as work together to complete the maze.

And *new* research, again in Australia, has found that sick sheep will actively seek out plants that make them feel better. This builds on previous evidence which suggested that sheep are able to detect which nutrients they are deficient in and they can also develop and store knowledge about which foods are beneficial to them and which are toxic.

So…. *not* so dumb!!

The *biggest* difference between sheep and goats, however, is that individual goats do what individual goats do, while for *sheep*, it's the whole *flock* that matters. Every one.

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And of course, not only do those sheep see the importance of *caring* for one another, they also recognise the importance of knowing and trusting their *shepherd*.

So, when Jesus separates the sheep from the goats, he's separating out those who have a strong sense of belonging, *and* who are able to recognise his voice – from those who think only of themselves.

If you can take yourself back to the reading, then you'll remember that both the sheep and the goats gave the *same* response to Jesus when he spoke to them… 'Lord,' they said, "*when* did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did or did not take care of you?"

Neither species had a clue when they helped Jesus *or* when they stood back from helping him – and what their reactions reveal is that *both* species did what came naturally. The sheep did what sheep do and thought to look out for one another - while the goats did *their* thing which was to pursue their own interests and never mind anyone else.

But behind the *goats* shocked: '*when* did we see you hungry or thirsty' and so on, lies the hint that if only they'd *known* Jesus was there, then maybe (!!) they'd have chosen to act differently. Do you think that might be true?

For the sheep though, the bottom line for *them* is *always*… others matter. *They* don't *know* any other way of living.

A habit that we, as Jesus' flock, would do well to learn.

Reflecting more

I tell you, all this sheep info is eye-opening. For me at least!

To be honest, I've just gone along with the mistaken stereotype we've all been fed, that sheep don't think for themselves, they just blindly follow on – when, in reality, it seems nothing could be further from the truth!

But then why am I surprised by that, when our stereotypes of anything very rarely match reality and always fail, *spectacularly*, to tell the whole story! For the bigger, more authentic picture we need to get to know the people – or in this case, the sheep – for ourselves.

And now that I'm armed with a bit more info about sheep, I confess my first reaction is one of relief!

Why? Because if I'm honest, the idea of being looked upon as "sheepish" was never something I really found appealing… Now however, I'm thinking the sheep label isn't such a bad one!

How amazing would it be, to be someone who's happiest when they're in the midst of a throng in which everyone feels they belong and feels cared for?

How fantastic would it be to be part of a species for whom it is second nature, part of our DNA, to *bother* about all those with whom we share this world? Both near and far?

A quick look at the world around us and it would seem humanity as a whole could *do* with being an awful lot *more* sheep-ish… It might lead to fewer wars and to less suspicion and distrust… hatred and prejudice.

As Jesus' followers though, I don't think we have any choice. That's kind of the point of this story. We need to be more sheep-ish - *because* that's how Jesus himself chose to live *his* life. Caring *for* and *about*, others. All sorts of others.

For Jesus, others always came first. He didn't ever grow *tired* of doing whatever he *could* for others. And neither did he ever think he'd done enough. He just kept on and on and on responding to those he could see were hurting and to those who were fragile or vulnerable, lonely or in any kind of need at all.

And it seems to me, that's what we too are called to do.

And as I think of the many different people I know and have met and have worked alongside, in *all* the communities in which I've lived or worked – *including* Geneva – I reckon I've witnessed some of the finest sheep-like qualities coming to the fore.

I have seen, and I see before me *here*, people who, like the sheep in Jesus story, really don't realise how much they've done and *do* for others. They just quietly get on and do it. I see people who have made and are *making*, a difference for the better to the lives of those around them. In small ways and in big.

People who know when to put the kettle on… Or when a coffee date is needed.

Those who *notice* the people around them - and make a point of being welcoming… or offer a kindly word – or a smile – and are slow to pass any judgement.

Those who somehow always turn up to help… to listen… or to offer anything from a hug to a pot of soup, to a lift…

Those who are simply there… when they're needed.

Every one of these things is a brilliantly sheep-ish act. These and so many others, are *Jesus*-like actions.

And what Jesus' greatest hope and desire is, is that all these *small* acts of kindness might be like raindrops – and come together to form an entire ocean of loving concern which can then flood the earth in such a way that this world and every*thing* and every*one* in it is enabled to flourish. As God intends…

'Lord, *when* was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty – when did we welcome you as a stranger or give you clothes or visit you?'

And the king will answer, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these… you did it to me.' What an amazing thought!

And while the sheep in the fields say 'baaa', the sheep that belong to the *Good* Shepherd, say: Amen. So say it loudly…

A-men!