

Saga of the Herdwick sheep

Soon after the joyous celebration of Easter Day, I was sitting in my living room idly flicking through the TV channels in search of something to fill the last hour before seeking to erase the strains of the Covid-19 lockdown in sleep, when I stumbled upon a documentary on BBC Four solely about sheep and shepherds. It lasted an hour, and was a very strange programme in many ways. I could easily have kept roaming through the channels because it didn't look too promising at the start. Yet, something seemed to stop me using the remote.

The programme was about shepherds bringing down their flocks of Herdwick sheep, the only breed robust enough to cope with the challenging conditions and terrain amid the rocky crags of the western part of the Lake District, to lowland farms for their mid-year shearing. The documentary focused primarily on one shepherd, although there was an entire team drawn from different farms along with many dogs to gather in hundreds of animals scattered across a wide, inhospitable area. It was sometimes quite unsettling, as it was obvious the pictures were coming from a miniature camera affixed to the head of the lead shepherd and another on the back of one of the sheep (giving a unique view from the centre of a jostling pack of animals leaping down narrow paths and gullies and fording becks). This was especially so when the initial part of the gathering-in took place in thick mist, penetrated only by the guttural commands and whistles of the shepherd guiding his dogs towards isolated sheep. I felt decidedly queasy as the boulder-strewn screes suggested a very insecure foothold for man and dog; however, they never stumbled. The entire process takes up to eight hours before the shepherds can relax with deep satisfaction as the sheep are herded into their pens with not a single one lost.

It took two days for me to understand that it was God who wanted me to watch that programme. I am part of a Bible study group based on St. George's Cathedral in Perth, Western Australia using the Internet. Pastor Rae Reinertsen gives us a weekly passage to analyse via a blog. Word & Way, for others to comment on. Amid the Covid-19 lockdown, this has been further refined to include a weekly video conference via Zoom - a boon in dealing with self-isolation. The BBC documentary proved invaluable tool for a commentary on John 10: 1-10, where Jesus talks about His role as a shepherd protecting His flock from harm. God, as usual, was in control! In fact, this is becoming a common experience. Each week, after getting my assignment from Perth [my former home], I study, pray and meditate. Then, at some point, I feel impelled to head for the computer. I have total trust in God. My fingers dance across the keys and the words flow across the screen. There are times when, reviewing my work, I'm filled with awe - did I really write that? It's been slow coming, but I'm beginning to learn how to listen for the call of the shepherd out searching for me. Under lockdown, and without the usual distractions, I find it easier to hear His call loud and clear. And it's so beautiful to know that, when I respond, I am joining His flock - gathered from across the world under His protection. Amen