

Shepherds and the Good Shepherd (1) Jacob



Shepherds feature a lot in the Bible. During Advent, I hope to focus on some of the shepherds of the Old Testament who point us forward to the coming of the Good Shepherd.

At the beginning of the first coronavirus lockdown I wrote about Jacob, a fugitive from the wrath of his brother, Esau. Alone and far from home, he dreamed of a stairway up to heaven; a sign that wherever he might wander, God would be with him. As his father, Isaac, had instructed him, he travelled on to Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), to the home of his uncle Laban. He fell in love with his cousin, Rachel, whose name means “a lamb”. Jacob agreed to work for Laban for seven years in order to be allowed to marry her. He spent much of this time caring for Laban’s flocks of sheep and goats.

Chapters 29 – 31 of the Book of Genesis tell the story of the relationship between Jacob and Laban, two cunning and scheming men trying to get the better of one another. Laban tricked Jacob into marrying his elder daughter, Leah, and then made him work another seven years as payment for marrying Rachel. Jacob got Laban’s permission to keep any black lambs or speckled kids from the flocks for himself, but Laban then saw to it that the black and speckled sheep and goats were put into the care of his own sons and taken some distance away. Jacob nevertheless succeeded, through clever stockbreeding, in building up a large flock for himself. The ancient breed of “Jacob Sheep”, with their distinctive piebald markings, was so named because of this story.

With the collusion of his two wives, Jacob eventually escaped from Laban and returned to the land of Canaan, where he was reconciled with his brother, Esau. The night before their meeting he had another remarkable encounter with God, not with a heavenly stairway as on

his outward journey, but through a meeting with a man who wrestled with him until daybreak. Jacob was given the new name of Israel (“he struggles with God” or “God struggles”), which would in time become the name of the nation he was to found.

Not surprisingly, there was rivalry between Leah and Rachel, especially as Leah bore six sons and a daughter before Rachel became pregnant with her first son, Joseph. Both sisters in turn gave their slave-girls Bilhah and Zilpah to Jacob, so they too could bear him children on their behalf. The result was a large and dysfunctional family and a band of brothers whose jealousy even led them to sell their sibling into slavery.

In spite of all the scheming and trickery, the envy, bickering and downright wickedness, God was still working His purpose out. Rachel’s son, Joseph, would rescue the family from starvation and bring them to safety and prosperity in Egypt. Leah’s son, Judah, would become the father of the tribe within which, in the fullness of time, the Saviour of the World would be born.

A prayer:

May the strength of God pilot us,
May the power of God preserve us,
May the wisdom of God instruct us,
May the hand of God protect us,
May the way of God direct us,
May the shield of God defend us,
May the host of God guard us against the snares of evil and the temptations of the world.
AMEN

(St Patrick)

- Rev John Barnett

Image: modern-day shepherd in Jordan (photo: Pete Wildman)