

It's not easy being called sheep. Sheep have become the symbol, in our culture, of mindless compliance with societal norms. Many an Internet commentator has delivered a withering, independent-minded diatribe against the unquestioning masses he derides as "sheeple." Even if you're comfortable with compliance, there's also the bald fact that, as stated by the farmer in a classic Monty Python television sketch, "Sheep are very dim."

Jesus, however, seems to credit sheep with a good deal more sense – in any case, with the one important sense of knowing their shepherd's voice. Important not because the sheep are followers in their essence, but because they are wanderers by nature. And sensible not because the sheep are dim enough to follow any voice, but discerning enough to follow only the right voice. That

discerning ear matters because the sheep are facing real dangers, from without and from within.

Jesus promises that with the Lord as our shepherd, we will "come in and go out and find pasture." Outside the fold, sheep are under threat from predators. The shepherd's rod and staff are not only comfort, but protection. But the biggest risk comes from the sheep themselves – they are apt to wander off, each to its own way. God our Providence promises to sustain us, but it's hard for us to believe in God's abundance. Instead, we are constantly scouting for greener pastures, imagining that we do not have enough by God's hand. "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it," writes Robert Robinson in his hymn that names God the "fount of every blessing."

Jesus, however, seems especially concerned about dangers inside the sheepfold. Even in our place of shelter and rest, thieves may come in to steal and kill and destroy. Some slip over the walls and whisper to us that our Easter hope is misguided, that we truly are following blindly, that death, after all, will have the final word. Some thieves call to us from outside, telling us that our shelter is a prison and that we'd do better to leave behind our false sense of security.

Then, sometimes, our own wandering hearts tempt us in the same way, giving us false hope that there's an easier path to transcendence, without all the work and uncertainty of transformation by the grace of God. In that same Monty Python sketch, a visitor to the farm is shocked to see sheep up in the trees – nesting, as the farmer tells him. The sheep are also trying to fly, convinced by a sheep named

Howard that they are, in fact, birds. The farmer explains that Howard is “that most dangerous of all animals: the clever sheep.”

Perhaps we, too, are trying to be too clever. And wouldn't it be easier if we could just take wing? If our human natures were merely an illusion, waiting to be cast off? If we didn't need to be patient followers, trusting beyond our immediate desires? If we didn't need to suffer the indignities of our limitations, and if we weren't called to ease the sufferings of our neighbours? Wouldn't it be easier if our shepherd and saviour didn't first have to suffer death upon the cross, before he entered into Glory?

In the eyes of the world, we may seem foolish to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. A thousand competing voices call to us that we are all like

sheep following an idle tale about Jesus, or that we should look for escape instead of sacrifice, should seek an easier bliss than the peace of God, should search for our own greener pastures and leave the rest of the flock behind. Christ crucified is still a stumbling block, still looks like foolishness to many. Why would we worship a God who became like us, who died as one of the lambs?

But Jesus doesn't call us to become something different; he calls us to grow into who we truly are. The Good Shepherd doesn't round up the sheep with a whistle, or herd them with whips and prods and dogs. The Good Shepherd calls the sheep by name.

In the end, our only wisdom is to know our shepherd's voice. Our one skill as sheep is to listen – to listen from the deep place in which we

recognize who we truly are, and whose we truly are. Because the Good Shepherd is the only one who calls us by our own names, our true names, our Created names.

It's still not easy to be called sheep. But it's our blessing, our safety, our abundance, to be sheep who are called – called each by name.