

John 10:1-10

The acute hearing of sheep and the gruff-a-long song of the shepherd.

I remember when I was a young boy my Dad would bring home lost lambs that were rejected by their mothers and the rest of the mob. They were simply left to die. It was our job to feed these lambs and rear them up. They were so fragile and sadly some of them died, especially if they got out of the shelter. My Dad would put them in a protective shelter from the weather. We would fill pint bottles with big teats and feed them. The shelter had a low gate and sometimes the cat or the dog would jump the fence uninvited wanting the milk we gave the lambs. We would have to scold them and tell them to go away. Each time we came out in the mornings the lambs would jump around and jostle one another to be the first to get their milk. They would follow us everywhere and at feed time we would call out "Come and get it" and they would come running. Even as they grew bigger and grazed in the paddocks with other sheep, all we needed to do was shout out "Come and get it" and out of the mob would run the lambs, now sheep, we had cared for.

This is just like what Jesus was saying and I wonder if as a boy he, too, had the special privilege of looking after some lambs. He tells a story, but he is talking about us and, guess what, the disciples had no idea what he was talking about. I don't blame them because half of them were fishermen anyway.

I've heard this scripture read like a "them and us" story, we are in and they are out, I'm OK and you're not. I think that is a selfish approach, we are all like a rejected lamb, somehow we don't quite fit the nice bunch of Christians and we feel kind of on the outside, we didn't have mums to dress us in pretty Sunday clothes, in fact we are quite grubby. Then one day a rugged old farmer in gumboots and a daggy hat picks us up and takes us to a shelter. All along he is singing a gruff kind of song, part hum, part whistle, part mumbled words and it sounds strange to us. He feeds us and makes sure we are looked after, and bit by bit we begin to feel valued and we begin to love this farmer and want to be close to him. Eventually he lets us out to graze with other sheep, but what we love to hear most is that gruff old hum-along song of his. When we hear him, we run to where he is, and we nuzzle into those gnarly loving old hands as he placed them on our heads.

When foxes roam or the eagle swoops low or the skies turn black, he is always there. He really is an extended part of that shelter he first put us into. We know we are safe, not because we are anything special, but because we know his voice and can follow him wherever he leads us. And when others say to us, have you read your Bible every day, or are you in the prayer chain and do you fast and pray regularly. When they challenge us and say is your faith strong enough, or are you putting on the armour of God daily. And when we are at a loss for words to answer these challenges that make us feel somewhat inadequate or inferior, the words that make us feel unworthy to be a lamb that put shame on us and accuse us of not being good enough. And we back away from these high and lofty ones unable to put into words what we know in our hearts, it is then we hear that timeless gruff-along song, that song that is foreign to the self-righteous but is so dear to us, and we say, I know who I belong to, and that is all that matters.