

Sunday 21 April 2024 – 3rd Sunday of Easter – “I know my own, and my own know me” – Beth Keith

This morning we welcome Freya into the Christian community by baptism. Beth Keith, who conducted the baptism, reflects on its meaning in the light of the Gospel reading.

Readings:

Psalm 23. John 10: 11-18.

Sermon: “I know my own and my own know me” – Beth Keith

My children are now taller than me, but I can remember when they were tiny. I can remember odd things about them. The way Ana spent the first few years holding on to my earlobe, painfully tightly, and the way Josh propelled cars along the hallway for hours and hours and hours and hours, only to begin again the next day with as much enthusiasm and delight. I also remember how tired I was. And the fog of sleep deprivation. Laurence, was an enthusiastic and committed Dad. But, whenever the children woke at night, as soon as they made the slightest noise, the smallest murmur, I would be wide awake, whilst he managed to sleep through the noisiest cry. I take great comfort in the fact that our children sleep through now, but the noisy and demanding cat (Laurence’s Cat!) has the ability to rouse Laurence at whatever hour. Whereas, I am told, the cat can even walk right over my face at night, without me stirring. It seems the perceived volume of the distress call, is related less to the actual loudness of the noise, and more to our wiring to respond.

And being able to recognise the voice, also works the other way round. Countless studies have shown how new-borns recognise and respond to their mother’s voice. Which though similar, must also sound different, depending on whether you are inside the womb, or new-born and experiencing this strange new world. These studies also show how older children’s brains respond to hearing the sound of their parents and caregivers. How these communications don’t just communicate words, but shape how the brain and child develops.

There is a beautiful image given in our readings, of God as the good shepherd. *I know my own, and my own know me.* The sheep recognise God’s voice. The sheep respond, there is closeness and trust. Whilst I might have experience of parenting, my knowledge of sheep, and shepherding is limited to a few episodes of one man and his dog. And there is a gulf of difference between today’s sheep dog trials and shepherding practices from 2000 or more years ago. But the images given in Psalm 23, although seemingly idyllic, and painting for us a metaphorical scene, give us a closer image of shepherding then, than current farming practices. Shepherds did not have defined fields with walls and fences to keep the sheep contained. They roamed around the countryside with their sheep, finding them pasture to feed on. The sheep came to recognise their shepherd, to recognise his call, and to follow that. Shepherds carried a rod and a staff. The rod was used as a weapon for protecting the sheep from wild animals or thieves. The staff was used to pull the sheep out of holes they might have become stuck in, or to help turn them over when they fell. It became a symbol of constant care and guidance. Shepherds would travel with their sheep, sleeping out at night, protecting them from danger and ensuring they were fed. Shepherds would band together. It could be a lonely place on the hills at night. Shepherds would rely on each other for friendship, protection, and encouragement. The sheep learnt to trust their shepherd because they were present; able to protect, and care, able to guide them to food, and to get them out of trouble. Perhaps these practices of shepherding have more connection points to raising children today, than might at first be assumed.

As parents, and God-parents, there is much to encourage us in this image of parenting. We have a role and vocation to protect and love those in our care. In the baptism service, those being baptised are welcomed into the family of faith and the whole church is asked: "As part of the Church of Christ, we all have a duty to support Freya in prayer and by our example. So I ask all present today: Will you support Freya on her journey of faith? Will you help her to live and grow within the body of Christ? And as the congregation here, we responded by saying: "With the help of God, we will". The responsibility to welcome Freya and support here in the church, falls on all of us as a community.

In baptism we also anoint parents and God-parents for the special vocation and responsibility they have. And as they were anointed I said: "I anoint you for service; remain faithful to your calling as God remains faithful to you". We are not alone. It is God who is the good shepherd and our vocations flow from God's love and care. Jo and Greg, parents and God-parents as you seek to love, protect, and guide Freya, lean and depend on God's care for you. God who leads you beside still waters and restores you soul. God who walks with you in the darkest valley, who protects, who comforts, and who brings you peace.

Amen.

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