

Reflection

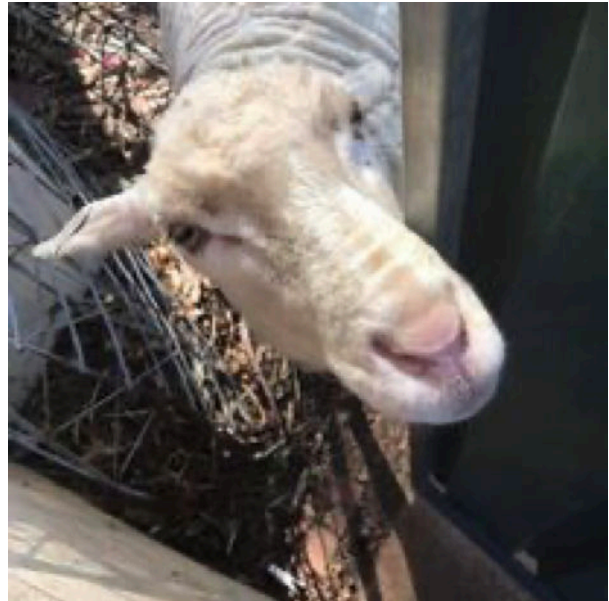
John 10:11-18

One of the earliest images used by the church is that of Christ the Good Shepherd. Have a look at these pictures that are from the early church. What is it that you see in them?



I think the first reason why this image was important, is because back then everyone knew what shepherds did. Even if they lived in a city, the cities were small and you would see shepherds while going about your normal business. It might be that your work had taken you for a short walk into the countryside, or maybe while you go to the market place you see a shepherd bringing the sheep in through the town. Unlike today, this would not be an unfamiliar sight.

I think that something that distances us from this image is that often in our culture, we think of sheep as simply woolly things that say "baa." This is not assisted by our flocks of sheep numbering into their thousands where it is impossible to know individual characters. However, I have a friend who farms out near Wongan, and she has plenty of stories about the pet sheep who certainly does have a lot of personality... Meet Nicky the sheep and some of her foibles...



Getting to know Nicky via the wonders of technology have given me a few more insights into the image of Christ the Good Shepherd. Nicky is a sheep with a big opinion – and she lets her humans know all about it. She also has quite a bit to say about “normal” sheep activities such as getting shorn. Getting to know all the sheep must require an awful lot of patience, but like other animals in our lives, it seems that patience is well rewarded with a relationship.

Shepherds in New Testament times would talk to their sheep and even if several flocks were mixed together, when the shepherd called, the right sheep came running. We could imagine it like a group of dogs at the dog park, each of whom knows its human and comes running when they are called to go home.

Shepherds would also need to have quite a lot of local knowledge. Sheep were not primarily kept on a farm where they could be looked after by a couple of fences. Instead, they needed to be led to places where there was sufficient food and water. They also required protecting from the wild animals that were spread through the region. We understand something of this with dingo or wild dog attacks on sheep – there has been articles in the news about the impact of this on farmers in the Eastern States. Imagine how much the hurt would be amplified for a shepherd who knows all their sheep and their personalities. It would be much closer to the loss of a pet in the emotional response. No wonder the shepherd would be willing to take those risks.

But in our modern times, the shepherd is no longer an occupation that is practiced, so I wonder what would be a modern equivalent. Take a moment to think about a contemporary occupation that shows some of these attributes. Perhaps we might have Christ the Kindy teacher. Spend some time playing with the image of Christ in its modern equivalent. What does this tell you about following in Christ's footsteps?