

**“THE SHEEP THAT
TAUGHT ME
MUCH”**



**BY
PHIL HYLTON**



Dedication

*To Jim, Paul, Adam and Jack
our loving grandsons, that you
too may know the source of the
love and joy we have had
together for more than fifty four years.*

“The sheep that taught me much”

“Souls of men why will you scatter like a crowd of frighten’d sheep”.

These are the first two lines of an old hymn by F.W. Faber, written in 1854. It was the second verse that touched me as I read it through in my morning quiet time in late December, 2000.

“Was there ever kindest shepherd
Half so gentle, half so sweet,
As the Saviour who would have us
Come and gather round His feet”.

These words were the final straw to put me on the road to recording some of my experiences of learning whilst the little flock of Jacob sheep were in my care at Pilgrims Hall, near Brentwood.

The nineteen acres of meadow and garden were my responsibility during the twenty-one years we were there as team members of this Christian Community.

My official title was “Estate Manager”, but, let’s put it this way “Jack of all trades” was nearer the mark. It was never a 9 - 5 p.m. job, it was a way of life, so much to be enjoyed, and at times some real heartaches, but all the time we knew that God had brought us there and it was His work we were doing.

Many hundreds of people have been blest by the work of Pilgrims Hall since its inception in the summer of 1968, when the work called “Fellowship House” moved from a house of the same name in Mucking near Stanford-le-Hope.

It is a wonderful story of God’s faithfulness to His faithful servants from 1963 till this present day, but this is not the object of this exercise, that must be saved for another time, and by someone else. I just want to tell you of the sheep and their happenings to show that, the Word of God, (the bible) is so true today as when it was written, and in no way should we neglect its teaching, if we do it is to our peril. Yes, I really mean that, God, our creator, has a plan for each one of us that we must in no way fail to follow.

The old testament part of the Bible tell us so much about shepherds and sheep, we come to realise that they were very much part of daily life. The Israelites were God's chosen people, and were nomadic in their ways, but by the New Testament times they were more settled and the poor old shepherds were so degraded that they were almost at the bottom of the pecking order. Jesus came to put a new teaching to this weary, Roman dominated nation, it was, that God, His Father, loves us all, we are all equal in His sight.

We have just celebrated the wonderful birth of Jesus, in fact we still have all our cards up, and other reminders of that special day, here around us now. Gifts, but none so great as God's loving gift to His fallen world of "A Saviour who is Christ the Lord." Yes, it was the message that came first to the shepherds who were going about their job of caring for the temple sheep in the fields in nearby Bethlehem, then, and only then did the message through the star lead the wise men to Jesus.

I have learnt that whatever our status in life is, we are all important in Our Heavenly Father's sight. These truths are found many, many times in His word to us. God has no favourites.

"Suffer the little children to come to me for of such is the Kingdom of God." St. Matthew 19 verse 14.

We had our flock of some seventeen to twenty ewes, many different characters, like humans, none were exactly the same. Jacob sheep have horns, some have four while others only two, we gave some names according to their horns, some because of their markings or even their shape. Twiggy was the noted one in this category, she was, as her name suggests tall, very lanky never ever had much meat on her , but "my"! she always did us well with her lambs.

Lambing once a year, in the springtime, as was always with our flock, in her first six lambing times she produced six sets of triplets, all healthy too, she eased up in numbers in the last three years with two sets of twins, finishing with a single, coo! He was a big lamb, helped to fill the freezer. "Oh"?? you say, well that is why we kept them in the first place, some four or five young ewe lambs of the best quality we kept each year for replacements, the number varied according to the need of the flock.

The rest eventually went into the freezer to feed the team of this charitable trust. We relied a lot on the produce of the field and the vegetable and fruit areas, as they do today, much work but all worthwhile.

Twiggy was not only as her name suggests, but also a very friendly ewe, in fact, she was always a hit with the children when the school visits were on, there were many such visits around lambing time, April and early May. The children would be given the opportunity to feed the mums with dairy nuts or the like; in the case of triplets, mums were left with the strongest two and the third was always bottle fed. You can imagine the joy that feeding these would give the youngsters. We very often, and they still so, go into the local schools with lambs, but that is another story.

Let us get back to Twiggy, picture the scene if you can, mid-April, a cold and very wet night, our tall friendly ewe was about due to lamb; well it was any time now. I went out last thing before retiring to bed at 11 p.m., the rain was belting down and all the in-lamb ewes were in the far hoppit, it's size was roughly three acres, the top six acres was split in two by wire fencing.

With my space beam torch, I was easily able to pick out the mums-to-be, Oh! one missing, I scanned the field to find that in the furthest corner was a ewe with lambs moving about. On coming closer to them, I saw it was Twiggy with three lovely sized lambs, one about an hour and one half an hour old with the third only a few minutes born, not yet got its leg, mum was still licking it clean.

The rain had not eased up since leaving the Lodge, only one thing to do was to take them all up the field and across the second field or hoppit into the shelter of our specially made lean-to, big shed, where a warm dry bed was waiting for them all.

To put them out all night, would put them in grave danger, firstly from hypothermia the lambs would not last long in weather like this. The second danger was such weak lambs were sure prey to foxes, yes, we have seen many on our fields, none more than at lambing; often scavenging behind the flock to pick up any afterbirth lying around and, as I have said a nice meaty lamb would never go amiss to hungry foxes who have a family to feed.

It is nature's way to set the timings of the breeding seasons to provide food enough for each animal, the rabbits too are good provisions for foxes. The latter mate in the first few weeks of the year, I have so often heard the mating calls of the dog fox, after dark it sends a cold shiver down one's spine.

The cubs are born just eight weeks after mating, so you don't have to work out why we never took risks leaving lambs on the field for their first few days.

Getting back to Twiggy again, sorry I keep drifting, with her proud family, I say proud, for she was so pleased when I arrived that wet night, she was making all sorts of little noises; the lambs seemed to respond to her. I chatted to her; she had no fears of me, nor did any of the sheep, I was really a hit with them all, especially at feeding time.

I pushed the rather weighty, but very needed torch under my arm and proceeded to line the three little ones side by side to be able to pick them up in both arms and carry them to safety. Isaiah 40 records these words - "God tends his flock like a shepherd; he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart: and gently leads those that have young."

In the meantime Twiggy was so pleased with her new family, she kept going round and round, using her quite varied repertoire of calls and grunts, nothing aggressive in any way, just being a bit of a hindrance to me making any real progress towards the haven of rest and dry.

The rain had not lessened one iota since I left home some ten minutes ago, all the way across the field round and round mum went, the little lambs were getting agitated more and more by mum's continuing behaviour, every twenty or thirty yards I had to put the lambs down, go through the same ritual of lining up to carry them, for they had wriggled themselves into such unmanageable positions, my wet and messy waterproofs became so slippery as we went on; that did not help, and Twiggy had not had time to clean one of them up before I came into the fray.

We got there in the end, nice dry bed of straw, lovely meadow hay in the rack and a pail of clean water, and the safety of the pen. We had built this place solely for lambing time and for the storage of hay and straw, also we found it useful when we were feet trimming, worming, etc. The pens themselves were made up of iron hurdles with a wide passage-way along the front, with a good over-hanging roof, and a four foot wall keeping the front open for plenty of air but making it safe from on driving rain reaching the occupants of the pens.

We never ever had trouble with foxes once the stock was safely in there. Twiggy got on with cleaning up her lambs who soon found where their first meal was. As I left them there looking quite content at about 11.50 p.m., I said to her, "You silly old thing, why couldn't you have just let me do my part and followed me, you always have trusted me. We would have done all this in less than half the time, and I too could have been in a nice warm bed, or at least at home with a nice hot cuppa".

The story does not really end there, for as so often there is another side of the picture. Well, here it is, the next night, yes, you have guessed, it was raining very hard again, my last look at my charges was about the same time, 11 p.m., the rain was lashing down on me as I made my way across the fields to count the mums-to-be, again, one missing. I picked her up in the beam of my torch, exactly in the same spot, ewes seem to like to get away from people and buildings where possible.

On approaching my lost sheep, I saw yet again one ewe and three lambs, (Was I watching a TV replay?); all very wet and the youngest still a bit messy. I talked to mum as I got closer, she just kept murmuring the sounds of delight, blur! blur! as much as to say "look what I have got". She too was perfectly at ease with me being there on this wonderful scene. I never cease to marvel at the wonders of creation.

The fact that it was still tipping down with rain never worried me, my first thoughts were for the sheep, I was so thrilled to see three more lambs safely into the world and the mother too was fine.

By the way, this new mother's name was "Little Lady", she had grown considerably since we first named her, she has always been a gentle ewe and a very caring mum, her offspring records are very good, being younger than Twiggy, and has not so many as her.

As I write, I can still feel that great sense of trust and peace that that dear ewe showed me as we crossed the grass together to reach the dry of what was to be her home for two or three days. Yes, I did line them up and took them in my arms, but I only had to do it the once, for both she and her little ones were so trusting. So much so that all the way she followed me closely. Every time, almost without exception, as I strode out to drier places, when my left leg went forward, she would touch the inside of my right leg with her nose and give a little "blur".

As I put her through the gate and into the pen, or rather she followed me into the lovely strawed area, I looked across to Twiggy in the next pen, I could not help saying "That's how you should have done it last night mate".

I said "Thank you Heavenly Father for what you have taught me tonight, a wonderful parable of how, "not to", and "how to" show your complete trust in the Good Shepherd. This is something I have had the privilege of sharing with many at meetings of the older generation as I have gone to different churches of many denominations.

When you pray and place your family, maybe your children, Grandchildren, nephews or nieces, or even neighbours children into the hands of the Good Shepherd, Jesus himself, just let Him lead them on, do not ask Him, then get in His way.

There are many good Christians who act like Twiggy, very good people but not wholly at one with the Father, then there are those like Little Lady who have complete and utter trust in the Good Shepherd.

“Which heading do you come under? Maybe even a bit of each”.

Here is another story of learning to put trust in Jesus loving concern for us. We had a very young ewe who had not been given a name at the time of this following event, after it all happened I called her “The Ewe of the Pond”. We always kept a few ewe lambs to run a year or so for replacements before mating in the autumn time with the ram we would hire each season. It so happened that the said ram trespassed into the wrong field and served this little one. Hence, the ewe in this story was small as she had not had enough time to mature, so I kept an eagle eye on her in case of any difficulties.

One week day, just after lunch, I went to check the animals before getting stuck into some of the outstanding jobs in the vegetable garden at the back of the house.

There was this nameless little ewe about to drop her second lamb, she was right down by the pond fence, quite safe from the pond, so I kept my distance for a bit, after the second lamb arrived she seemed at a loss as what to do with these two wet parcels.

She was trying to clean two at once, it was not a very nice day, though it was not raining this time. I felt it best to get her into the seclusion of the pens where she would be quiet and warm and keep near her offspring, this would give them all a better start than being out in the open field; she was in unknown territory concerning lambing.

To take her in was in no way as straightforward as it sounds, she did not mind me at all. I always left “Gem” my collie type bitch outside on these occasions. She had not been trained for working sheep, I got her at the age of two from local kennels having been in and out of such places several times. She was good company for me but unliked by one or two ewes when they had lambs.

I picked up the two newly born, fully expecting mum to follow, very slowly does it, but only to find after a few yards she ran back to where the where the whole business of lambing had started.

Putting down my prize bundle, I made a call like a lamb, fine, she came back again to fuss her family quite content that all was well, she followed me a few more yards, then off she went back to the starting point again. This went on a few more times, each moved us nearer, though still a way off of our original target.

On reaching about half way, she suddenly decided that what I was trying to do for her and her young family was only good, so off we went, slowly, but no real stops to the finishing post. Some times I had to walk backwards to assure her I still had the wee ones in my arms. There she was, her worries over, soon settled down and was on the road to being a good mother, in spite of her limited single life. I see her doubting trust in some people I have met or hear of, who have learned to trust the Lord, The Good Shepherd, still want to live in the wonderful experiences of new birth and are not prepared to follow Him regardless; they keep going back to the past and not appreciating the joys and the deep inner peace and all the help that is in store for them.

We must grow in trust, thus gaining the confidence to go forward into the unknown with Him.

God's words to Joshua after He called him to lead the Israelites into the promised land were:-

"Be strong and courageous, do not be terrified, do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go".

The early verses of St. John, chapter 10, speak of the sheep knowing the shepherd's voice, how true that has been with my little friends on the field.

Audrey and I lived in "The Lodge", a sort of a gate-house to the estate, we had direct contact with all other members of the team by the intercom. This was a complex method of communication when it was first installed by Marconi's Christian Union. Their leader was Tom Slater and David whose surname fails me now, they got together among themselves in 1970-71 gathering all the various equipment needed and it was in full summer 1971 at no expense to the community.

It proved a very workable system for many years with some eight or nine phones throughout the house, stable block and the Lodge. In spite of the main box of tricks taking up a large space in one of the cupboards on the main landing, it was a delight to us all. "Coo! how it saved our legs." You could note that the main control panel would in today's communication age be about the size of a matchbox.

I have digressed a bit, yet it was through the intercom that the following little tale started. Sitting at the breakfast table at 8.15 a.m. in the Lodge when the intercom rang, it was Chris whose living accommodation in the house overlooks the sunken garden, in a very anxious voice he said, "Quick, quick Phil, all the sheep are out and many are in the sunken garden eating the new shoots off the roses, if I go out to them they will go all over the place." I belted up the drive with the thoughts of my poor roses, the pride and joy of that part of the gardens. Before I got to the house, I yelled "Get out of there", not many of them were in sight when I first shouted, but Oh! the next few moments was equal to a Tom and Jerry cartoon. At the sound of my voice everyone of the sheep, must have been 33 or 34 of them, old ewes, young ewes and all the lambs, most of those were around two months old, just ran back to where they had come from. Some taking a short cut down the steps onto the lawn, others via the spinney, a few went over the bridge over the lily pond. They were going at such a rate that the bridge was not wide enough for so many feet at one time, hence two lambs got pushed off sideways into the water, but were none the worse for their journey.

All this escapade was over in a matter of minutes, but left us with lasting memories. Safely back into the part of the field which they had ventured from via the small gate that was left open by some early sightseer.

Sheep are very much like children at times and even adults, none of us do what is right all the time, especially when the grass looks greener on the other side.

"Does the Father have to shout to you at times?"

A lovely verse, again from Isaiah 30, v. 21 which I have been encouraged by, knowing that the Lord is with me

"Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying: This is the way; walk in it."

A little side line, it does not matter how much grass there is in any field, for whenever I would be with the sheep and had the occasion to walk near the gate to the other pasture they would all be close behind me wanting to go through.

Telling the story about Chris just now, reminds me of an emergency call that came in the middle of the night. I was awakened by the ringing of the outside phone, we seemed to be the best hearers of phones in the night. I let it ring for a short while before answering it. It was a call from the U.S.A., the caller insisted on speaking to Chris, he could not be roused on the intercom, but they still wanted to talk with him.

So I ran up to his flat window on the ground floor it was, not having the house key in my pyjamas pocket. I rattled on his bedroom window calling him by name, this method was successful. It disturbed others though, the sheep too heard my voice and were all lined up along the fence on the other side of the front lawn bleating like mad waiting for me to show up. No! they did not get any extra feed at that time of night, 2.30 a.m.

Please note I did not say any words or calls that my woolly friends normally hear me use, maybe it is my Essex accent they understood.

John again was right when recording Jesus' words in his gospel 10 v. 4 "The sheep hear my voice". This truth was demonstrated to the full with some children on one of the schools visits. A Christian run school in Goodmayes, I believe it was, twelve or so youngsters about eleven and twelve came with two members of the staff to explore various aspects of natural history as found in our grounds at Pilgrims Hall. It formed part of a special project they were doing back at school.

I had the joy of leading the morning session, for them. Notepapers, clipboards and pens were the order of the day, they meant business. We sat down on the York stone steps leading onto the big front lawn facing the sheep fields, thirteen acres of pasture land. The top six acres nearest the house was called "The Parkland" by the previous owners, many of the big trees that were dotted about have long since gone. The month was June, all the lambs were well grown but still with their mums. The whole flock were lying quite peacefully at the bottom of the parkland under the massive oak which must have been over one hundred years old. I am no expert on that, I may be way out, below the real figure.

The plan we had for this session was to spend time first with the sheep, giving them a potted history of this super breed of sheep and how we look after them.

I suggested the young people should call the sheep up the field and we could start from there with them, they did not need a second bidding, call they did! All the resting animals did was to look up in wonderment as to what all the noise was about. "What other calls could you make?" I asked.

This too was of no avail, I felt like Elijah on Mount Carmel telling the prophets of Baal to “shout louder, perhaps your God is asleep”. (See 1 Kings 18 v. 27).

The problem was soon solved when I shouted out “Yarbee”, the call I always used, why that I still don’t know, perhaps it came from me 26 years as a cowman calling the cows to save walking nearly half a mile to get them in for milking. Anyway, it worked, every one of the sheep came up the field at full speed. They were there at the fence before we got across the lawn armed with a big bucket of nuts. The class received a short homily on the real Good Shepherd before we moved on to the next stop. I trust that the message they heard and took part in will ever stay with them.

Today’s question to you is a simple one “Do you know His voice?” If you don’t maybe you are not giving Him time to speak to you or too busy asking. Psalm 46 v. 10 says to us all

“Be still and know that I am God”

We must say right here that this group of young folk had a super day, pond dipping, bark rubbing, sand stone turning, finding countless insects and doing a host of other things.

Much of what they saw and heard was very new to many. “Do you have a place where you can explore, your own garden, Common, woodland?” One can never stop learning, it’s a life-long process, so much is left out by this busy modern world we live in.

“The best things in life are free”.

Working with animals within the family set up helped the children living at the Hall learn so much about the wonders of nature, it was just part of their lives to see the sheep, chickens, ducks and the doves, and a horse at one time. When lambing time came round each year, they were always ready to help.

Rachel, Dave and Maria’s daughter was a real shepherdess, she used to set her alarm clock so as to be out with me by 6 a.m. during lambing time, she knew all the ewes and was a great help, we formed a bond over the years which is still very strong today. Rachel was only about eight years old when she began her “Up with the lark sessions”.

The day that stands out by far to me where the children were concerned, was when Skippy lambed, bear with me while I share this heart-warming story. We named her Skippy, she stood out among the crowd, not only because she was nearly all black, but because even as an adult she would still skip up to the trough at feeding time. This lamb like habit never left her until one night she had a tragic encounter with dogs. One other ewe was killed, just bled to death from bites in the throat. Skippy had been seriously bitten on the top of her neck, right in the nape, I suppose you would call it, leaving a gaping hole, the likes of which, I in all my many years with animals had never seen. It was almost, yes, almost half-way round, the Vet did a wonderful job, all this happened some six weeks before she was due to lamb.

With much nursing she fully recovered, very much to the two Vet's surprise. Our Vets were fine Christian men and with their prayers and those of many others who had learnt of the need, I was sure that the Lord had more to do for us, and to do in us in the days to come, this will be shown out in the story which is coming up now.

Skippy was able to go out with her mates well before her lambing time came when she had two still-born on the meadow. I guessed them to be dead a few weeks before birth. Perceiving a further lamb was imminent, we took her into the pens, it so happened that our two grandsons, Tim and Paul were staying with us and their inseparable friends Rachel and her young brother Jonathan were with me at the time, the ages of these youngsters were about 6, 9, 10 and 11.

I called Doug across to hold the ewe, careful not to upset her too much, he talked quietly to her, as I was busy sorting out the other end.

The children were watching over the fence that was in front of the pens. They, knowing of the two still-born lambs were eager, by their conversations together, hoping for a successful birth this time, the chances of that, to me at least, were rather poor, they did so want Skippy to be alright. As you can imagine she had been the centre of concern throughout the team during all her ordeal

The Vet's bills paled into insignificance at this particular moment. The lambs front feet were now showing, a stillness reigned from the spectators on the other side of the fence. I looked up to see those four little heads, eyes shut tight and lips going it, in silent prayer. Oh! I was thrilled at what I was witnessing at that crucial time.

Even now as I write, many years later, I still glow with joy. The nose appeared, a tongue poking out of the side of the mouth, before the rest of the body was there, the little tongue gave a positive flick, "it's alive", I called out in joy or was it relief. The youngsters were as excited, I thought they were going to leap over the corrugated fence, as high as it was.

We may never know whether their elation was for Skippy's well being and for her having a lamb to care for, or just because their prayers had been answered, maybe a bit of each.

What a wonderful boost for them to know that God does answer their prayers, the proof was there before them. Skippy and her super little lamb went out with the rest of the mums and offspring within a couple of days; the two were always seen together until such parting came as with all the families.

"Do you and I have that child-like faith?" Turn again to Jesus' words: Matthew 18 v. 1-4 and Mark 10 v. 13-16, that says it all.

There is so much that could be said about the work among children at Pilgrims Hall, but this is not the time and place! I will give you a flavour of what it meant to so many.

Maryland Primary School near Stratford used to come to us twice a year, Spring and Autumn, two big coaches each time full of excited little ones, arriving around 10.15 a.m.

A warm welcome awaited them, a short introduction in the front hall all sitting on the floor, then school milk, no eats at this time in the day though some were sorely tempted. Then all outside and according to classes, four groups would form with at least one team member each. There were quite a few mums to help the staff from the school and with a pre-arranged plan we would strike off in different directions; we got this down to a fine art and with so much to see over such a wide area this would take well up to lunch time.

The sheep at lambing time were the top attraction, the ewes were happy to, for they often got a double portion of feed on these sort of days. It was a great adventure to some of the little ones, so much to see all in one day. Two little West Indian girls, twins, were so frightened, they had to be lifted off the coach. They had not seen any grass before, and as the driver had pulled right to the edge of the front lawn that was the only way to get them into the front hall.

I questioned the Headmistress about these dear little ones, and she said that the mother would take the girls to the local shop and along to the school and that was as far as they had ever been.

It was always our daily practise to commit the whole day to the Lord, whether jointly or in our own quiet times, this day was no exception, Oh! how we rejoiced to see these children unwind, especially the twins, as the day wore on. The teachers and helpers too relaxed. The last session was always given over to a little get-together in the main lounge; see their eyes as they entered the lovely room.

The headmistress got all the groups to sing to us and teach us their special song, then after a little talk about Jesus and His love for us all, we taught them, The Love of Jesus is so wonderful, etc. etc.

Session ended and with the fifteen minutes left, loos, and out on the lawn for a run around.

They would want you to go with them. I ended up with one of the twins holding tightly on to my hand with the other girl on the other hand and several around me. I must have looked like the Pied Piper, the little one who was so frightened when she came, was joyfully skipping at my side singing "The lub of Jesus is so wonbertal", over and over again, we all, joined in with her.

How we rejoice at the wonderful love of Jesus, the same love is for those children too. I ask, even today, "Who got the greatest blessing that day, them or me?"

There are so many more tales to relate, but I want to end with one about our little flock of Jacob sheep which has been a lasting blessing for me, and the greatest blessing I have ever received in all my time working with animals, and that is a life time nearly, seventy six years now. (When I was born my parents had a dog named Peter, so they really wanted to call me Peter, no go, so they called me Philip (a lover of horses)). I have loved animals ever since.

I have shared this story many times and I value this time to share it again. It has encouraged many in the past, it is my prayer that you too will be enlightened by it.

A dear old friend once remarked to a young, up and coming pastor who was speaking quite proudly of the fact that he had never ever repeated a sermon. "Young man" my friend said. "The truth is always worth repeating". So here I go:

The time 3 a.m. on an Autumn morning, I was asleep in the comfort of my bed in the Lodge, when the intercom rang. I scrambled to the phone, with eyes adjusting to the brightness of the electric light, to hear Shirley's voice, she lived in the second floor flat overlooking the fields. "Quick Phil, I can hear dogs in the sheep field." Awake enough to know what horrors that could involve, I pulled my trousers over my pyjamas, jacket on, grabbed my 12 bore and some cartridges, and my space beam, dashed as fast as I could up the drive, pushing the ammunition into the gun as I ran.

With the dogs barking and sheep bleating madly, it sounded real chaos, I shouted with all my might as I crossed the sacred turf of the croquet lawn, I must say, that was the fastest moves made on that grass for many a year. As I ran I made out in the lights of the village beyond, two big dogs, one the frame of a Great Dane, the other that of an Alsatian. I let go a barrel over the top of them, careful not to cause damage to any of my charges, wherever they might be.

The rogues raced down the field toward the village some quarter of a mile on, they certainly had been scared, if not hit. I held them in the beam of the torch for some way, when they leapt the fence and were gone. I turned to my poor sheep who were all huddled up in one corner of the hoppit by the lambing pens. I must mention, that being early Autumn all the lambs, those not kept for replacements had been removed by way of the butchers, this left us with eighteen ewes.

From what seemed nowhere and in no time a police car with two officers in it arrived on the forecourt of the house. Maybe Shirley had phoned, I don't know to this day, but there they were. I ran back across the lawn to relate the happenings. One of the men, was a giant size, maybe it was my thinking at such an unearthly hour. I was glad to see them there, mind you, if I had been on the wrong side of the law he would have been the last one I would want to face.

On hearing my account of the event, he said, "Come old chap, jump in and we will go and drive around the village to see if we can spot them". No", I said, "The poor old sheep are just terrified, I want to be with them." This great figures of a man gently put his hand on my shoulder and said, quietly, "OK, old chap, I know how you must feel, my Dad's a farmer". We will look around and be back in half-an-hour or so". Off they went into the night.

If you have ever seen a group of frightened sheep, you will know what I mean when I say they were so upset they were in the corner packed as tightly together as they could be. In the middle of this enclosure, or a bit more away from them than that, was a tall old pine tree, one of the remaining trees from the Parkland days . Why I did what I did, I don't know, I went and sat under this pine with my back up against the trunk and my gun, with a fresh shot in it, across my knees.

Without using my torch I began to call them, softly and gently, "Come on, come on, come on girls" or something in that way. Soon I saw some movements among them. Twiggy was the first to respond, then one by one they left the spot where they have been driven, to come to me.

Yes, every one answered my call, I had no food for them, surely that was far from their minds, and me too.

You may not know, but no sheep will lie down unless they are at ease, well, within about thirty minutes or so, before the police returned, as they said they would, every ewe, all eighteen of them were lying down around me under the conifer. I could have cried for joy.

The police had had a good scout round to no avail, and after a few kind words were exchanged, they left. I went back to the sheep to make a closer check to see if any had been hurt, some wool had been lost by one or two but nothing physically amiss.

I praised the Lord for His protecting hand and thanked Him for Shirley's timely phone call. I stayed with them a bit longer, and as I went through the whole event in my mind, the verses from the scriptures I had learnt dozens of years ago, came right back to me all their fullness.

The words of Jesus are an invite to us all as recorded in St. Matthew's gospel 11 v. 28-30 "Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest." The sheep too found peace and rest in responding to their shepherd's call.

"Are you going through a bad patch just now?" Jesus the Good Shepherd is calling you too, why not allow His love and His peace flow through you?

When we come to that place of peace and rest known only in Jesus, he does not want us to stop there. The next part of that text in another invite, this time, to work for Him and with Him. He says "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Let me open this up a bit; this was written many years ago, and remember, Jesus had been a carpenter. I like to picture him as he worked at his bench doing the best for all his customers. Oxen were used very much for heavy jobs in those days and would often be worked in pairs, for this they needed to be yoked together, "joined together", in other words.

Jesus would have made many such yokes, a good kind owner of oxen would want his animals to be comfortable at work, whether ploughing or pulling heavy loaded carts, so he would get these yokes to fit his individual beasts. A bad fit would cause chaffing to the beast's shoulders or neck, making him or her not able to work at it's best.

Jesus, here in this passage from the new testament is inviting us to go on, having found peace and rest, not only to experience the good things, but go out and work for Him and with Him, to help bring others into the place we have found for ourselves after answering His call to "Come".

"Take My Yoke upon you" = we will wear it together, as we go forward. "And learn from me" = I will help you go with me I have done it before, Jesus says.

When I first went to work on the farm in my mid teens, the bosses son, Ben, did most of the ploughing using two horses. I had a turn, only for a short while I might add, for it is a real skill keeping the plough share in the ground, as well as the right depth, while driving two horses in the straight line. This thought brings meaning to our Lord's words already quoted.

Ben always had the older and more steady and experienced horse on the left, he was the one who had to walk in the furrow made on the previous bout, or round. The furrow was generally about 10 inches wide, quite an effort for the big shire horse to achieve, but he always did it. He set the pace too.

Now "Combo" Ben's much younger and lively team-mate would have the unploughed land, stubble or maybe grassland to walk on. This flatter ground would give him much more room for error, but at the same time be learning from the more mature one. After some time it would not be a drudgery for him, soon developing into a very good working team.

As one steps out in faith from that resting place, a real refreshing place, the Lord will not ask of you or expect more of you, than you can cope with.

There are many areas in the lives of each one of us that needs ploughing up and reseeded "So why not take the yoke upon you and allow Him to lead you on?"

There are times when a shepherd has to be on extra alert. I will close with this little tale of unwatchfulness. It was tuppung time at Pilgrims Hall, the Jacob ram we had hired for the season from a very good flock was running with the ewes.

Now just picture this scene, I was emptying the bag of feed into the long trough, we fed dairy nuts and wet beet pulp which always went well with the ewes, just finished the job when a friend came onto the field with one of his old pals from South Africa, John by name. I left the sheep when my friend called "Hi Phil, meet John". I stepped forward with outstretched hand to greet him to shake his hand when I was very swiftly transported past John's hand to the feet of both visitors. I had taken my eyes off the offending ram for only seconds. With presence of mind I grabbed at his collar as he stood over me, all I could say was, "You silly old fool".

Once holding that collar he was quiet. My choice of words rather surprised the onlookers, but you see, I left a lot of unwanted clutter behind when we came onto the team some fifteen years before.

A dear christian friend once said to me that a christian is known by their reactions rather than their actions. "Thank you Father for your help to me that day". Needless to say I was not hurt physically by the ram's behaviour, it was only my pride that got dented, this was the third time I had been caught off my guard, and had to suffer a moving session.

"Do I hear you laugh?" don't blame you, it must have been a funny sight. I hear you ask "Don't you have a bible passage for this too?"

Well what about this, Paul writing to the people at Corinth recorded in 1 Corinthians 16 v. 13-14:

"Be on your guard, stand firm in the faith, be men of courage and be strong. Do everything in love".

God bless all who have read these simple but meaningful lessons from the sheep by a part-time shepherd.

Over the years the sheep have been such a blessing to those who have come to Pilgrims Hall, be it for long stays or just a few hours.

Blessings too for past and present members of the team.

To talk those lovely grounds, the sheep add to the wonderful sense of peace that prevails, it is something that is seldom experienced in the busyness of the world around.

During her early days as a team member Pat Garratt was so enthralled seeing lambs born and performing all the antics that lambs get up to when all together, she was inspired to write these two poems, which are so fitting to conclude these writings.

I am so grateful to that lovely lady for letting me use them here.

The Shepherd's Care

The weary shepherd rubs his tired eyes
Awaking from contented slumber 'neath the starry skies.
Yet even while he sleeps, his ears stay tuned to heed.
The urgent cries of any of his sheep in need
Even the trees are watching, and the dewy earth
Waits in expectancy for muffled sounds that broadcast a new birth.
The knowing shepherd reassures in tender tone,
Resigned to wait and be at hand till labour pains are done.
With heaving sighs that herald in the dawn
The damp and blood-stained figure of a little lamb is born.
With trembling legs that stretch and test the frosty ground
It stands triumphantly and tries its first small bleating sound.
Its proud and careful mother shields its wobbling form
And tucks it closely to her woolly coat so soft and warm.
Forgotten is discomfort, pain and suffering.
As all the flock cry welcome to the tiny little thing.
And so the sun, transparent in its eiderdown of morning mist
Rises to applaud this lovely scene of newborn bliss.
The shepherd glad and knowing that his work is done
Gives thanks and praise to God from whom all life does come.

The Sacrificial Lamb

Little lamb, so beautiful,
Why were you born to die?"
To satisfy man's hunger,
"Was that the reason why?"

When you played in the meadow,
"Did you already know
The path that led to slaughter
That you must surely go?"

And did you try to struggle,
Or were you satisfied
That you'd fulfilled your purpose,
O Little lamb that died?

Lamb of God, so glorious
Why were you born to die?
To take man's sin upon you
Was that the reason why?

Before you came from heaven
To do God's will below,
You knew the cross was waiting
And yet you loved us so.

You didn't try to struggle
For you were satisfied
That you'd fulfilled your purpose
Lamb of God who died.

Lamb of God now risen
To set your children free
Thank you, you were Saviour
Content to die for me.