

Last week I was back in Wales on retreat. I went back to my favourite viewpoint - a little hill called Y Craig, with a wonderful view over the Vale of Clywd. When I was there last year, it was at a very significant moment in my long retreat - between the week when we had been following the story of Jesus' suffering and death, and the day when we first began to look towards his resurrection.

During that time last year I learnt to imagine my way into the gospel stories, and sometimes my mental pictures were very real. The day I came to Y Graig I was imagining the meeting between Mary, on the day after Jesus had died - absolutely bereft - and a young shepherd boy called Seth, from Bethlehem. In a prayer time earlier, this boy Seth had come into my mind, listening to Jesus in the temple, and Jesus talking to him afterwards. Seth had a little sister, and Jesus had pulled from his bag a small stuffed sheep. It was something that had been his when he was young, and his mother had put it with his things when he left home those long three years before.

Jesus gave the little sheep to Seth, for his sister - asking him to promise to teach her the 'shepherd psalm' - you know the one. Now, as I imagined it, in this time of bitter loss, Seth was asking Mary if she wanted it back.

This imaginative story helped to make the feelings around the death of Jesus somehow more real to me. I was able to

be more caught up in the emotion of it all. And as I was sitting thinking about this last year, on a bench on Y Craig, I heard a noise, and a woman came towards me. She apologised for disturbing me if I was having a quiet moment. I explained that I was at the retreat house down the road, which she knew - and then I discovered that she was herself a shepherd.

She went out onto the hill and called her sheep - a motley collection - and they came to her. She and her husband have brought them over the years, to keep the brush down in the nature reserve - 9 black and one white sheep - all chosen because they were flawed and no one else wanted them. Some with crooked horns, or only one horn - all a bit different.

She told me their names - this one is white one - that was easy - this one is clever one - this is the one from Luke and Lisa (they've died but their lamb has grown up) and so on. She knew her sheep by name, and they knew her. They knew that she comes with the food, and so they came to her.

You can see the links with our gospel reading... I love the idea of making a flock out of the ones nobody wanted! That's what church should be like - a place of belonging for everyone, especially those who have no other place to belong.

And it was wonderful the way she knew those sheep. 'I am the good shepherd - I know my own and my own know me' says Jesus. Each of us is known by our Lord - known with all our imperfections, and particular personalities, with our strengths and our weaknesses. And each of us is loved as we are. Loved so much that, like a shepherd defending his flock, or risking everything to save a stray, Jesus puts himself between us and all that is dark and evil, and gives up his life for us.

It's good sometimes to stop and reflect on the love he has for us - not just for all of us but for **each** of us as an individual. He knows us by our name. He has walked with us every step of our lives - through the green pastures and the dark valleys. He knows us better than we know ourselves.

When I think about that, I think about what it means for me and for us here. But I also think about the others that don't yet know this. 'I have other sheep...' says the gospel, 'I must bring them also'. It isn't just those of us who come to church who are known and loved by God - God knows each person, he knows their potential and their need, and he loves them and wants them to know his love.

Sadly many people are not aware of the love which God has for them. We are here because we have sensed

something of that love, and in our own way, we are trying to respond by living our lives with and for God. But we can also share God's longing for all those others he knows by name.

Often when we think about this we feel pretty helpless. We do what we can - put up posters, pass on invitations to services, make our church welcoming. And we don't want to be people who bang on about Jesus all the time and put people off.

But I've been thinking that maybe there is a middle way. Maybe there are ways we can share God's longing for more people to know his love, and maybe that longing can begin simply with prayer, and care. And maybe if we have the courage to hold certain people before God in our hearts, he may lead us to gently offer them a step towards him. It's not easy - it's a challenge and we will need to help and support each other - but I think maybe this is something God is leading us towards, and I'll be talking a little bit about it at the annual meeting tomorrow.

When I was thinking about God knowing each of us by name, something else came into my mind. I saw a news report on one of the terrible tragedies in the Mediterranean this week. After giving the numbers who have died, the reporter said; and we have to remember that these are not

statistics, these are people, each one loved and missed by their families.

I think God knows and loves each of these people too. He doesn't miraculously intervene and stop the tragedies - there and in Nepal - although we perhaps wish he would. But he does call us to remember all the people who are not just statistics - the people being callously trafficked, the parents whose children die of malaria, the older people living with dementia, the families at the bottom of the pile in our own country. Our first reading doesn't beat about the bush: 'How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?'

In her trip to South Africa Sarah met people who have a great faith, but lack many things we have - and it is a challenge to our lifestyle and to our generosity. We have been given so much - faith and material wellbeing. If God's love abides in us, we can ask him to show us how we can reach out to those he also loves and knows by name, those who have so little.

Some people show us an example of what is possible. I discovered the name of the shepherd I met - it was Wendy. I discovered this because when I told her I had been thinking about the Good Shepherd, she made it clear that she knew him. She went to the church down in the village.

I had been there and looked in the porch. There was a notice about knitting for the people who worked with clubbers at night in Chester. There was a notice about the local foodbank. There was a notice about their prayer chain, for those in need. There were bottles of water offered, with the chance to give to the appeal to help with the Ebola crisis. All in this tiny village church. And all had at the bottom, as one of the contacts, Wendy.

On a hunch, I asked, are you Wendy? And she was. This good shepherd was not just caring for her sheep, she was working with her Lord to care for the spiritual and material needs of many others that he knows and loves and calls. What an inspiration! What an invitation to find our own ways to be like Wendy - or go on finding them. As it says in that reading; 'We know love by this, that the Son of God laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. Little children, let us love not in word or speech, but in truth and action.'