

Shepherds who dream forests

The actor Ewan McGregor is an ambassador for UNICEF and is currently featuring in a documentary on BBC2 called 'The Cold Chain.' It follows his journey into the most remote parts of the world with UNICEF representatives, whose job it is to ensure that the children living there are immunised against polio and measles. The first leg of his journey took him to Nepal and up into the vast beauty of the Himalayas to the tiny village of Luma. His difficult journey could only be taken on foot and took several, long days.

Ewan made that journey under care of Carna, a local sherpa who carefully carried the vaccines along the difficult path to Luma - a journey he has made each month for years. Few words were spoken directly between the two men but Carna led group with a quiet determination, alerting them to the dangers and pot holes along the way. He had a watchful eye, and encouraged with a gentility that was elegant. When the mission was over and the men parted, there were tears of sadness between them. A deep and beautiful connection had been made.

The way Carna guided the UNICEF group is a wonderful example of the shepherding that is described in the Gospel today – Good Shepherd Sunday.

'I am the Good Shepherd; the good shepherd is one who lays down his life for his sheep.' John 10: 11

By describing himself as a shepherd, Jesus was showing us the way to lead. How to be. Shepherds have qualities like being caring, gentle, strong and hardworking. The call of Jesus is to know him and so be like him. For us all to be shepherds to the people we live and work with and meet each day.

In our daily lives as parents, grandparents, teachers, friends etc we would never normally see ourselves as shepherds would we? And yet, with a little space, and time to reflect I can see that amongst all that is going on in the bustle of the day there is wonderful, wonderful shepherding work going on too. I am a shepherd mum, a shepherd teacher, a shepherd wife and friend. I am also dependent on others who are gently leading and guiding me too. My colleagues, friends, students, husband and my own children can all gently send words of blessing or challenge, that in some way give my life direction and meaning. I need their influence in my life.

I am learning that the actions we carry out that we often perceive as ordinary, or insignificant or 'just our job', can be immensely significant and important in the lives of those around us. The Irish poet, Patrick Kavanagh, wrote the following poem about his father and the trees he planted:

Poplar memory:

I walked under the autumned poplars that my father planted
On a day in April when I was a child
Running beside the heap of suckers
For which he picked the straightest, most promising.

My father dreamt forests, he is dead –
And there are poplar forests in the waste places
And on the banks of drains.

When I look up
I see my father
Peering through the branched sky.

To be a shepherd, in whatever way, is to be someone who 'dreams forests in the waste places.' To have the vision and imagination to trust that the seeds and suckers of love that we put into our relationships now, will grow and flourish – even if it takes years.

As shepherds we are there for the long haul, through thick and thin, through the tears and the joy and the pain and the anxieties of the people within our care. In truth, we are constantly moulding and shaping other's lives. Every single interaction is significant. Yes, the reality of life is that there is hurt and anger and frustration living within all of us. We wouldn't be human if there wasn't. It is also good to remember that we are all very capable of 'BIG' love too. We are hard wired for it!

How can we not be?

We are all children of God. Through the incarnation, God made each and every heart the dwelling place of our divine creator – joy giver – Christ. The reality of this means, that the divine and the human are entwined in every person, in every place. It is in our very humanness that God is present. So, if like Carna the sherpa, we remember to keep a watchful eye on our 'flock' and to use our human gifts to guide them with gentle elegance, we will truly be leading in the way of Christ.

