

Our love affair with Swaledale began 34 years ago:

Hannah was just a baby and we holidayed there after Easter.

Though the weather was bad, we were stunned by the beauty.

On Good Shepherd Sunday after Communion in Muker,

we picnicked in the car,

since the rain was coming down like stair-rods.

Whilst Rachel nursed Hannah,

we looked down on the soggy valley,

its green meadows full of huge ewes, clearly due to give birth.

What I took to be a tramp was huddled against a stone wall,

sheltering as best he could from the storm.

His gabardine was thin, wrapped around him with string,

But whenever a ewe collapsed, writhing in agony,

he rushed over to her, easing her lamb into the world.

No tramp, but a truly good shepherd.

The next day, driving over from Reeth to Leyburn,  
we were overtaken by a truck laden with bales of straw  
repeatedly tooting its horn.

Every sheep from miles around flocked around it,  
their shepherd bringing them food.

When I tried the same trick and tooted my horn,  
the sheep were unmoved, giving me disdainful looks:  
'You're not our shepherd, we do not hear your voice.'

Another day there was a lad on a motor-bike in a narrow lane  
playing at being a shepherd, but revving his bike up,  
frightening the sheep, scattering them everywhere -  
they clambered over walls and shot off in all directions.

The poor sheep dogs couldn't control them,  
were barking and nipping the sheep, making matters worse.

A hireling and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not.

Lady of the Dales, Hannah Hauxwell,  
talked of her cousin,  
who had gone out in a fierce snow storm one Christmas day  
to bring his sheep, scattered on the fells, safely into the fold.  
On Boxing Day they found his frozen body with his sheepdog.  
Their tracks made concentric spirals around the warm fold  
into which they had safely brought every ewe.  
A shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep.

In Alan Bennett's play, *the Question of Attribution*,  
the Queen looks over her lush grounds and estate and quips,  
'I suppose heaven will be a bit of a come-down after this.'  
Swaledale is not an alternative to heaven, but a glimpse of it.  
Because like every paradise, it surprises us with Jesus,  
the eternal Good Shepherd, bringing all his lost lambs home,  
so that there will be one flock, one shepherd.