

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Gospel: John 10:11-18

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away-and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

REFLECTION 1: THE GOOD SHEPHERD

There's a lovely story told about a schoolteacher who asked her class of nine and ten year olds to bring to school some symbol of the resurrection. They were each given a plastic egg in which they were asked to enclose the small symbol. As the eggs were subsequently opened to reveal their contents, one child chose a small spring flower, symbol of new life. Another egg contained a nail, a reminder of the nailing to the cross, another a small stone a symbol of the stone over the burial chamber. Then a boy, Bernard, presented his egg but there was nothing inside. The teacher, thinking he had forgotten to place his symbol, asked if he had perhaps omitted to insert it. Bernard explained that in fact the egg itself was the symbol – the empty shell was in fact symbolic of the empty tomb! Jesus had risen!

Today we are going to consider another image of the Saviour – the good Shepherd, who laid down his life to save us with his risen life. Ancient shepherds had to work hard at looking after their sheep. They had no horse or dog or shotgun to ward off wolves – all they had was themselves. This made their work dangerous. Take David for example – the young shepherd. David took care of his father's sheep and anytime a lion or a bear carried off a lamb, he would attack the predator and rescue the lamb. But the danger to the ancient shepherd's life was not only from wild animals but also from outlaws and rustlers. There's an account of some Bedouin rustlers who attacked a sheepfold near Mt. Tabor. The shepherd didn't flee but fought back to save his flock but he paid by laying down his own life for his sheep. The ancient shepherds' dedication to their flocks inspired the biblical writers to speak of God as a shepherd – God's dedication to Israel was like that of a shepherd. And so the Psalmist sings, “The Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need, even though I go through the deepest darkness, I will not be afraid’ (Psalm 23: 1, 4).

Since the religious leaders of Israel took God's place on earth, they too were referred to as shepherds. Unfortunately with the passage of time Israel's religious leadership deteriorated. When this happened the prophet Ezekiel spoke out in God's name, saying, ‘You are doomed, you shepherds of Israel, you take care of yourselves but never tend to the sheep....you have not taken on the weak ones, healed the ones who are sick, bandaged the ones who are hurt, I will give them a king like my servant David to be their shepherd, to be their own shepherd, and he will take care of them; (Ez. 34).

It is against this background that we read today's Gospel (John 10:11-18). Jesus says, ‘I am the good shepherd who is willing to die for the sheep....they will listen to my voice and they will become one flock and one shepherd’. In other words Jesus is the fulfilment of the prophecy made by Ezekiel. Like the good shepherd David, he cares for the weak and helpless, heals the sick and goes out in search of the stray and the lost. Jesus lays down his life for his sheep, rises from the dead and shares his own risen life with his sheep.

What should our response be to all this? I think it should be one of gratitude to Jesus that through his death and resurrection we have been saved from eternal death and raised up to eternal life. Also our response should be one of profound openness to Jesus; for Jesus is present in our midst right now, continuing his work of salvation. He continues, through us to care for the weak, heal the sick, bandage the wounded, bring back the stray and seek out the lost. Jesus is indeed the Good Shepherd promised by God. He laid down his life for us over 2,000 years ago, but also continues to live among us and communicate to us his own risen life.

REFLECTION 2: GOD'S NAME IS MERCY

Pope Francis' emphasis on the link between mercy and evangelization has cast new light on the risen Christ as the Good Shepherd. In today's Gospel, the risen Jesus gathers his disciples, who were scattered like sheep when he was arrested and executed. His first words to them are of peace – total forgiveness for their cowardice in his hour of need. The image of lost sheep describes many people today including Catholics who have wandered away or feel abandoned by the Church. The thought that there is someone out there searching for them, eager to rescue them from the brambles of human temptation and entanglement, to bind up their wounds, lift them up on strong shoulders and carry them home – is a comforting message. It certainly beats being scolded by those who expect the casualties to crawl in off the battlefields if they want care.

Mercy is first aid, no questions asked. The word 'mercy' comes from the French 'merci' meaning thanks, but it also means reward and is associated with the word 'merit' meaning reward. Mercy is therefore the reward that the Lord bestows on those who show unconditional kindness towards one's fellow human beings who didn't expect it or didn't deserve it. Mercy is the unexpected kindness towards others with no strings attached. Pope Francis' vision of a merciful church does not dismiss the need for justice or accountability; he simply puts mercy first. The prodigal son, the ultimate lost sheep, might never have come home if he thought his father would only scold, belittle or punish him. In his desolate state, the son must have sensed that his father was grieving for him and wanted him to turn homeward. In fact the story suggests that it was the father's longing, his daily walks to the gate to see if his son was on his way, which prompted the son to consider coming home.

The Good Shepherd will not give up on a single sheep. He knows each one by name, and loves him or her so much he is willing to lay down his life to save each individual. There is no talk of 'cutting his losses' or the kind of 'tough love' that lets a rebellious child suffer the consequences of his/her own actions before there can be any intervention or negotiated return home. God's unconditional love springs into action at the first sign of regret or repentance. As Pope Francis has said, 'We may tire of asking for God's forgiveness, but God never tires of offering it'. God's name is Mercy. He cannot do otherwise for it is God's very nature to love and forgive.

Today's Gospel is for anyone responsible for others – parents, teachers, doctors, priests and bishops. Anyone entrusted with others who are vulnerable and need guidance has a model in the Good Shepherd. Their office cannot be just control or direction from a distance. A true shepherd goes among the sheep with humility and gentleness, until he or she, in the words of Pope Francis, 'smells like sheep!'