

HOMILY for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday

Today's Gospel provides us with one of the loveliest images of Christ, namely that of the Good Shepherd. It re-echoes the wonderful lines of Psalm 23, "The Lord is my Shepherd". The relationship between the sheep and their shepherd is based on familiarity. As a shepherd moves among the sheep, the sheep follow only their shepherd. They recognize their shepherd and will not follow a stranger. The shepherd cares for the sheep, defends them against threats such as marauders and wolves and leads them to greener pastures. The Gospel says that Jesus uses this metaphor to teach the nature of the relationship between Himself and those He has redeemed. He says "I am the Good Shepherd".

In Palestine at the time of Jesus, the shepherd would bring back the sheep each night from the pastures to the sheepfold. The sheepfold is a circular stone wall with an opening or door. Once the sheep were inside for the night, the hired shepherds would go away to seek their own comfort and pleasure without bothering about safety of their sheep, but the good shepherd would lie across the opening of the sheepfold and his body would act as a human gate, protector and shield. Nothing could pass in or out of the sheepfold without touching the body of the shepherd and he would risk life and limb to protect his sheep. So the good shepherd lays down his life to protect his sheep.

Jesus identifies Himself not only as the good shepherd, but also as the gate to the sheepfold itself. He says, "I am the gate. I am the door. All who came before me are thieves and robbers; but the sheep didn't listen to them. I am the gate; if anyone enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture." Here lies the key to understanding what Jesus is saying. Jesus goes beyond an ordinary shepherd or an ordinary sheepfold or an ordinary gate and is talking about being saved. He is talking about eternal life and comparing Himself to the gate through which the sheep will go out in order to find pasture. The pastureland is therefore a symbol of eternal life and the gate becomes a symbol for access to eternal life. So Jesus is using a double metaphor here: He is both the authentic shepherd who is going to lead the sheep out to pasture and the gate offering access to eternal life. *(Cf. Brant Pitre's explanation of Sunday readings)*

The good shepherd literally puts his body on the line for his beloved. He lays down his own life for the good of others. Such a caring attitude, however, goes against the prevailing attitudes of the present day. We live in a world where, by and large, the name of the game is to look after your own interests because if you don't no-one else will. We are in a world where greed and selfishness rule, where wealth is raised to the pedestal of a deity and the quest for wealth becomes the be-all and end-all of human

life. The words of St. Peter in today's first reading warn, "Save yourself from this perverse generation" (*Acts.2:40*).

We need good shepherds today in every walk of life. In our homes we need parents who really care about their children, who spend time with them, and who still care for them even when they disappoint them. In our schools we need teachers who know their pupils and who take a personal interest in their well-being. We need teachers who engage pupils with the holistic dimensions of human life, who are demanding without being impatient, vigilant without being overbearing and ready to love without expecting anything in return. In our hospitals we need doctors and nurses who care about their patients and do not treat them as mere objects. The world needs scientists who understand the limits of science and believe that any good enterprise of science should be to protect life, make living on earth better, serve human needs and protect our environment without destroying it. We all need to be protectors of our global environment. In the words of Pope Francis, "Let us be protectors of creation, protectors of God's plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and of the environment".

In public life we need people who care about the welfare of others rather than their own selfish interests. The global world needs people who care about and protect others. COVID-19 is a lesson for the entire world. What started in a little corner of the city of Wuhan has robbed you and me of our normal lives as we used to know them before now, crippled companies and caused millions of people to lose their jobs, plunged world economies into recession, caused the deaths of thousands of people and left hearts broken. Be careful what you do because the cost might be too high to bear. Be careful how you live your life because a little mistake could have global repercussions.

The Church needs pastors who are willing to give a loving service to their communities. And we should not forget that all Christians have a fundamental vocation to be loving and caring people - in other words, to try in their own lives to extend to others the love of Christ, the Good Shepherd, which they themselves have experienced.

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