

Good Shepherd Sunday – Year B

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John: (Jn. 10: 11-18)

Jesus said: “I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd is one who lays down his life for his sheep. The hired man, since he is not the shepherd, and the sheep do not belong to him, abandons the sheep and runs away as soon as he sees a wolf coming, and then the wolf attacks and scatters the sheep; this is because he is only a hired man and has no concern 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 my sheep. And there are other sheep I have that are not of this fold, and these I have to lead as well. They too will listen to my voice, and there will be only one flock, and one shepherd. The Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me; I lay it down of my own free will, and as it is in my power to lay it down, so it is in my power to take it up again; and this is the command I have been given by my Father.”

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

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The 4th Sunday in Easter time has been called “Good Shepherd Sunday”, since the Gospel of today is taken from chapter 10 of St. John for all the three years, having the parable of the Good Shepherd at its centre.

For the same reason, the Church invites us to keep this Sunday as “Vocation-Day,” that is, as a day of prayer to ask God to send to us good and numerous shepherds from among our own children, and also as a day of reflection, to see how we may help our children to become the good shepherds that Christ wants them to be, and to remain so till the end of their lives.

Jesus was a wonderful teacher. He used the image of the sheep and shepherds to teach us the words of eternal life

- Sheep are gentle animals; they have no way of defending themselves against wild beasts. They are very useful animals and provide their owner with wool and milk besides giving a lamb each year.

Some rich shepherds in Palestine possessed hundreds of sheep, but ordinary shepherds possessed only between fifty and one hundred. They lived for weeks and even months with their sheep away from their villages, wherever pasture could be found.

At night, several shepherds would gather their flocks into a common enclosure made of stone walls some four or five feet high. They took turns to watch during the night, since there was always the danger of thieves stealing or of wild beasts attacking the sheep.

The enclosure had a gate, and in the morning, each shepherd would call his sheep with a peculiar sound which his sheep would recognise, and the various flocks would take different directions following their respective shepherds.

When you take cows to graze, you go behind them leading them with a stick. Not so with sheep: the shepherd goes in front, calls them in his own way, and they follow him.

- Till some years ago, there were plenty of wild beasts in our jungles; today there are few. Similarly, wolves and even lions were still common in Palestine at the time of Jesus; they would attack the flocks and even the shepherd trying to defend them.

- Most shepherds looked after their own flock; but rich shepherds would engage one or more men to look after their numerous flocks. Obviously, a paid-servant would not look after the flock with as much love and care as the owner.

This explanation about shepherds and sheep in the land of Jesus will help us to better understand today's Gospel. It is taken from chapter 10 of the Gospel of John, verses 11-18.

- When Jesus says of himself: "*I am the good shepherd*", he meant to say that he is not just a good shepherd among many, but the best shepherd that ever existed. That is, the love and care Jesus bestows on each one of us, his sheep, infinitely exceeds what the best shepherd on earth would do for his own sheep.

Jesus says: The good shepherd knows his sheep. What is he telling us?

- When you see a flock, say of about a hundred sheep, you will not be able to distinguish one from another; to us they all look alike. Not so for the shepherd: he knows them one by one, how old they are, how much milk each one gives, the diseases they suffer from and so on. He might even have a pet name for each one of them. Not in vain the shepherd spends weeks and months at a stretch with his flock. .

- *Well, Jesus knows us better than the best of shepherds knows his sheep:*

He knows us *by name*, that is, intimately, one by one, right to the core of our heart, far better than our parents know us or we know ourselves.

He knows to the least detail our real needs at each and every moment in our life, and provides for us; he knows our spiritual diseases, that is, our sins, and the best medicine to cure our soul.

And his is not an idle knowledge; he provides for all our needs in body and soul.

How happy should we be that our shepherd, Jesus, knows us so well; we often complain that people do not understand us; people might not, but Jesus definitely does ...!

b) Jesus says, The good shepherd leads his flock. How does Jesus lead us today?

- He leads his sheep to places where pasture and water can be found in abundance. He leads them to safe places, away from wild beasts. In the evening, he leads them to the fold where they can rest safely during the night.

- *No shepherd can compare with Jesus in leading his sheep:*

He leads them to his Church through Baptism. Christ's sheep find in the Church food and drink in abundance, and also safety.

He leads us daily through his Spirit that we may discover God's loving plans for us, and through the same Spirit gives us the strength to carry them out. He leads us to repentance, whenever we stray away from him by sin.

In the evening of our life he leads us home to heaven where we shall rest in safety for ever. No one will ever miss the way if he allows himself to be led by Jesus...!

c) Jesus says: The good shepherd feeds his sheep. How is Jesus feeding us now?

- As we said above, he leads them where food and drink abound. When sick or wounded, he feeds them with his own hand, sometimes sharing with them his own food.

- *And no shepherd can ever afford such a nourishing food as Jesus provides for us: He feeds us through prayer. He feeds us with his word. He feeds us with' his own Body and Blood in the Eucharist.*

No other shepherd can boast of *he himself being the food of his sheep*. Jesus offers himself as *our* food. Could anyone dream of a better nourishment?

d) Jesus says: The good shepherd defends his sheep. How does Jesus defend us?

He defends them against wild beasts and against thieves; he watches over them day and night.

But who is the shepherd that would allow himself to be devoured by, say a lion, rather than let the wild beast take away one of his sheep? A sheep, or a cow, are precious to us, but far more precious is our life. Better to lose a sheep than to lose one's own life... ! And yet this is not the way in which Jesus acted while on earth

He himself tells us in the Gospel of today: *"The good shepherd is one who lays down his life for his sheep"* (Jn. 10: 11). And this is exactly what he did: to save his sheep, to save us all from the wildest of beasts, the devil, he gave up his own life.

- But there is still more: Among men, if a shepherd dies in the defence of his flock, it is because he cannot help it; if he could save himself, he would.

Not so with Jesus: he clearly tells us in his Gospel that *"no one has the power to take his life; he lays it down of his own free will"* (Jn. 10: 18). The Jews killed him because he allowed himself to be killed in order to save us. As if this were not enough, Jesus continues to lead us also after his death. He leads, feeds and defends us today as effectively as ever before.

How many and how powerful are the reasons Jesus has to call himself THE GOOD SHEPHERD, the best shepherd that ever existed; no one can compare with him!

In the Old Testament both civil and religious leaders in Israel were considered shepherds, people entrusted by Yahweh with the material and spiritual welfare of the people. But these shepherds of Israel proved unfaithful most of the time.

Yahweh complains bitterly against them in chapter 34 of the book of Ezekiel:

- they had shown no concern for the flock and had sought only their own advantage, causing thereby incalculable harm to the people of Israel.
- their task would be taken away from them by Yahweh who would provide an exceptionally good shepherd, one according to his own heart, to guide the people.

This prophecy of Ezekiel was fulfilled in Jesus. It was a very well known prophecy among the Jews, and when Jesus proclaimed himself solemnly to be “the Good Shepherd”, those listening to him clearly understood that he was referring to the good shepherd announced by Ezekiel; in other words, they understood that Jesus was proclaiming himself “the Messiah”, the Saviour of the world.

- By experience, the people had already understood that the religious leaders of their time were no better than those Yahweh had condemned through Ezekiel, people whose only aim was self-esteem and material gain.

Jesus condemned those shepherds in very harsh terms: He calls them “no sheep of his” (Jn. 10: 26) since they refused to believe in him. They pretended to enter the kingdom of God without passing through the only door leading into that kingdom: Jesus.

He calls them “thieves and brigands, people whose only aim is to steal, kill and destroy” (Jn 10: 8, 10). They claimed a right to the flock of Israel; they did not realise that they were already dismissed for their unfaithfulness, and that the faithful shepherd announced by Ezekiel was there in front of them. There was no place for them in the flock of Christ either as sheep or as shepherds.

If Jesus is the Good Shepherd who are our leaders today? Are they still shepherds? If so, what is their relationship with Christ the Good Shepherd and the door?

Yes they are our shepherds, but Jesus remains the only Good Shepherd and the door. It is the will of Jesus that some of his sheep become in turn shepherds to look after his flock in his name. A Christian family should consider it a great privilege that Jesus may call one of its children to the priesthood, or to consecrated life.

In this regard we should keep the following two points in mind: It is Christ who calls; he is the one to whisper into the heart of our young people the “Follow me” of the Gospel (Mt. 4: 19; Jn. 21: 19).

Let no one venture into the way of the priesthood and consecrated life unless called by God (Heb. 5: 4). But it is the work of the Christian community to help

those whom Christ calls, to become the shepherds that He wants them to be and we long to have.

How can we help in promoting priestly and consecrated vocations in the Church?

We could go now into a thousand considerations, but let us limit ourselves to one, which is the exhortation of Jesus to his disciples: 'Pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest' (Mt 9:38) Pray! The urgent call of the Lord stresses that prayer for vocations should be continuous and trusting.

As we pray, we must help those among our children called by Christ, to go through the years of training with only one aim in view: the good of souls and the spreading of God's kingdom. Neither money nor occupying a place of honour in society nor any other human motive should have anything to do with their decision to become priests or religious.

To enter the priesthood with any motivation other than to be a shepherd according to the heart of Christ, would mean to have access to the flock of Christ scaling the wall rather than entering through the door which is Christ.

- The result would be havoc for the flock and ruin for such shepherds:

We are called to help also those who have already become shepherds, i.e., our priests. It is not enough for them to have chosen the right way once; to have had access to the flock through Jesus on the day of their ordination to the priesthood.

They are entering into their work afresh, day after day, and they must do so always "through Christ" who is the door, putting aside everything which does not lead to the good of the flock. The moment a priest starts being moved by ambition, by greed or by selfishness, he turns into a thief and a murderer, causing many a spiritual death among his flock, taking the sheep away from Christ, rather than leading them to him.

These may appear harsh words, but the words are Christ's and not mine. We must feel a deep responsibility towards our seminarians and priests; they are our concern. If they keep faithful to Christ, starting their work in Christ's name day after day, we shall be the gainers; if they turn into thieves and murderers, our Christian communities will suffer the consequences.

Let us pray: Father, we praise you for having provided for us in your Son Jesus a door to come to you. Keep us, sheep and shepherds, faithful to his love and to the task he has entrusted to us. Raise many shepherd's in the Church after the heart of the one and only Good Shepherd our Lord and Master so that the flock of our times can be taken care of and led to the safety of heaven, He lives and reigns with you for ever and ever. - Amen.