

4th Sunday of Easter - Year B - Good Shepherd Sunday

The fourth Sunday after Easter is traditionally known as "Good Shepherd Sunday, with the Gospel taken from the long discourse in John, chapter 10, where Jesus presents himself in this attractive image of the Good Shepherd. Though there are only a few actual shepherds who remain in our modern world, the image of Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, continues to bring us comfort and assurance.

The image of the Shepherd is a familiar one in the Old Testament. We all know Psalm 23 which confidently prays "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, Fresh and green are the pastures where he gives me repose. By quiet waters he leads me to revive my soul". In the 34th chapter of the Prophet Ezekiel, we hear that God would one day come and shepherd Israel himself. Shepherds guarded, guided, protected, and watched over their flocks, just as God guards, guides, protects, and watches over Israel... over us.

This image comes to a climactic expression in the words of Jesus today "I am the good Shepherd." What precisely makes him good? According to Jesus himself, he is a good shepherd because is willing to surrender his life, does lay down his life for the sheep. He is a good shepherd because he is other-oriented and has our interests at heart. He loves his flock and his sheep, and he is willing to die for them.

The Latin word for shepherd is the root of the word Pastor which is often used to describe the priest who leads the community. From this Latin root, we also derive other terms such as Pastoral Care, Pastoral Council, and Pastoral workers. In hospitals, these days we have Pastoral Practitioners who tend to the sick and the dying with Spiritual and Emotional Care. Let us highlight three main roles of all pastoral activity after the example of Jesus the Good Shepherd.

The current shepherd of the whole Roman Catholic Church Pope Francis stated that "A good shepherd has to be out in front of the sheep, among the sheep, and behind the sheep" – In front, among, and behind the sheep.

What does he mean? A good shepherd has to be leading the sheep out in the front. He has to know where he is leading his flock, he has to know something the sheep do not know, and he has to provide a vision to his flock, the good shepherd is not someone who wanders around with his sheep, he knows where he is leading the sheep. This is the leadership aspect of being a good shepherd. Jesus very clearly laid down a vision for the kingdom of God and stated "I am the way, the truth, and the life", "Take up your cross and follow me", and "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" The good shepherd leads us to pasture, to water, to safety. Jesus the good shepherd is our Lord and Master – who leads each of us to where the eye has not seen and the ear has not heard.

Secondly, the good shepherd also has to be among the sheep, if he is always out in front of the sheep he loses contact with his sheep, and becomes irrelevant and indifferent because he is out there leading away and does not know to empathize with the struggle of the sheep. So Pope Francis famously said "The good Shepherd has to have the smell of the sheep" He has to be walking alongside them in the common humanity we all share. Jesus ate and drank together with his sheep, he went out for dinner not only with his friends but with tax collectors, sinners, and disreputable people. He said I do not call you servants anymore, because the servant does not know his master's business, but I call you friends. Jesus did have the smell of the sheep because he was their brother and friend.

Finally, the Good Shepherd is not only in front and among but also behind the Sheep. The good shepherd goes behind the flock and picks up those who have fallen away and lost their way, attending to those who are wounded, afraid, and

excluded. The Good Shepherd leaves the 99 and goes after the lost one, and when he finds it carries it on his shoulders. Jesus said, I did not come for the healthy but for the sick, not for the righteous but to call sinners for repentance. He reached out to those who were outcasts and marginalized in society. He was deeply attentive to those who had fallen behind like Zacchaeus, the woman at the well, the Man born blind, and the lepers.

So Jesus is good at all these three tasks. He was in front, among, and behind. So the true pastors of the church have to follow in Jesus's footsteps. They have to study orthodox theology to become people of prayer and to have a deeper understanding of the Kingdom Vision to lead their flock. Then they have to be a companion, a brother, a friend to his flock. A larger part of the ministry of the shepherd is showing up, what we call the ministry of presence. He has to have the smell of the sheep. Then lastly it's also about reaching out to those who have drifted away from the church, those who have stormed away from the faith, and those who have fallen from grace to grass. The good shepherd needs to reach out to the wider community.

How wonderful it is that Christianity is not just a set of ideas or a philosophy but it's a relationship with someone who has a voice. The first disciples were indeed privileged to hear the voice of the historical Jesus with its very particular tonality and texture. But we can hear his voice too, in our own way, when we hear the scriptures proclaimed at Mass, we hear the voice of Jesus. We also hear the voice of Jesus in our conscience, which Cardinal Newman called "the aboriginal vicar of Christ in the soul" We hear the voice of Jesus in good spiritual and religious friends, in those people who comfort us and also challenge us, and keep calling us to higher ideals and encourage us when we fall. So let us keep listening to our good shepherd who will continue to lead us to fullness of life both in this world and the next. Sheep aren't the smartest of animals on the planet, can't run fast, easily get lost, are not good at defending themselves, quite

submissive so much so we say don't be sheepish.. when we are not brave or courageous... so why does Jesus call us his sheep... well firstly, we too have many weaknesses like the sheep but also because of what the sheep are good at...sheep are very good at listening well and can identifying their shepherd's voice. They can distinguish from many voices their shepherd. Similarly, we too hear the voice of our good shepherd Jesus Christ, and do not follow the voices of wolves.

As the flock of the good shepherd, let us also reflect on what we need from the Lord Jesus currently in our life's journey. Do you want Jesus to provide leadership, vision, and guidance currently? To be your Lord and Master and go ahead of you. Or do you want to experience his tender presence, his friendship, and his care for you during this time, and walk alongside with you? Or do you want Jesus to pick you up and bandage your wounds because you have fallen and feel like you need Jesus to reach out for you because you can't to go him anymore? The good shepherd can be for us what we need, let us ask for this as he comes to us in the Eucharist today.