

HOMILY ~ FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

MAY 7/8, 2022

Some years ago, a renowned actor was asked at a function to recite for the pleasure of his fellow guests. He consented and asked if there was anything they specially wanted to hear. After a minute's pause, an old minister asked for '**Psalm 23.**' A strange look came over the actor's face. He paused for a moment, then said, "**I will, on one condition – that after I have recited it, you, my friend, will do the same.**"

"**!!**" said the preacher in surprise, "**I am not an elocutionist, but, if you wish it, I shall do so.**"

Impressively, the actor began the Psalm - "**The Lord is my Shepherd; there is nothing I shall want ...**" His voice and intonation were perfect. He held his audience spellbound; and, as he finished, a great burst of applause broke from his guests. As it died away, the old minister rose and began to declaim the same Psalm. His voice was not remarkable, his tone was not faultless, but, when he finished, there was not a dry eye in the room.

The actor rose and his voice quivered as he said, "**Ladies and gentlemen, I reached your eyes and ears – he has reached your hearts. The difference is just this – 'I know the Psalm, but he knows the Shepherd.'**"

Today is the Fourth Sunday of Easter; and traditionally, we celebrate it as "**Good Shepherd Sunday,**" and think in a special way of the '*pastoral*' love of God. Each year, the Gospel Reading for today is chosen from Chapter 10 of St. John's Gospel, where Jesus speaks of himself as the "**Good Shepherd.**" Today, in fact, we listen to the third and concluding part of that Chapter.

In recent times, this day has also become known as "**Vocations Sunday,**" a day in which prayers should be said for vocations to the priesthood, diaconate and religious life; priests are the '*pastors*' of the Church.

Jesus the Good Shepherd ...

The very loving and beautiful image of the shepherd and his sheep is very old in Scripture. However, like all scriptural images, it is not to be taken too literally or in its totality. The emphasis, of course, in the Scripture images is on the shepherd. The image implies someone who gives loving, caring and compassionate leadership. It is a situation where there is mutual recognition between shepherd and sheep, where there is voluntary following and total trust. The sheep listen to and recognize the voice of their shepherd and that is why they continue to follow him rather than another. How many of us here knew the voice of our mother when it was calling us home for dinner, giving us love and sometimes discipline. The tone of mother's voice when disappointed, or her joy, and especially her pride in us. Mothers are the Good Shepherd of our existence. She gains her strength from Jesus, the TRUE good shepherd!

The Gospel Reading proclaimed today is very brief, but extremely rich in content. In the short and beautiful few lines from the Gospel of St. John, we come in vital contact with Jesus the Good Shepherd, who answers our most profound human longings and intense spiritual needs. '*Eternal life*' is the Good Shepherd's most beautiful gift to us, the flock he shepherds. We are heartened by his declaration, "**I give them eternal life.**"

The Shepherd's gift of eternal life demands a positive response from the recipients. Jesus said, "**My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.**" The interpersonal '*knowledge*' that exists between them necessitates openness in listening and obedience in following after Jesus, the Good Shepherd. To hear is to recognize the authority and importance of the speaker's words; it is to enter into communion with him, to put oneself under his guidance, to follow him, to attach oneself to him, to become his disciple. "**We are his people, the sheep of his flock.**"

The finale of the discourse on the Good Shepherd returns succinctly to the bond that unites the sheep and their intimate union with the one who leads them. But it is not a mere repetition of what we already know. As a matter of fact, with the last sentence, we reach a high point in Jesus' revelation about himself and his relation to the Father. Indeed, today's Gospel proclamation contains an astounding Christological revelation: "**The Father and I are one.**" With these final words, Jesus makes it clear that, in his role as '*shepherd*,' he identifies himself with "The Shepherd" who is the God of Israel – full expression of the Father's being. This is the basis for the life-giving pastoral ministry of Jesus. The profound mystery of unity between the Father and his Son Jesus, the victorious paschal Lamb, is the source of the latter's incomparable power and unimpeachable authority as the Good Shepherd. To the obedient and loving flock of disciples, whom he knows intimately, Jesus gives the solemn assurance of divine protection.

Vocation to Priesthood and Consecrated Life...

Today is also "**World Day of Prayer for Vocations**," a day when Christians are invited to reflect on the meaning of God's call and to pray that they may answer the call to dedicate their lives to serve the Church in a special way, i.e. to shepherd the Church communities, particularly as pastors, deacons and religious. To help us reflect on the meaning of the priestly vocation, the Church presents to us in today's Gospel the figure of Jesus the Good Shepherd. Last Sunday we saw that Our Lord commissioned and gave charge to Peter, by saying three times, "**Feed my sheep.**" In that way, he made Peter a shepherd, a pastor. Our Lord continues his work of shepherding his people through Peter and his co-workers: the apostles and disciples, and through their successors: the Pope, the bishops, priests, deacons, catechists and committed lay people.

The first thing we need to say on this day is that every single person here has a vocation, every single person here has been and is being called by God through the Holy Spirit to offer their special gifts to the rest of the community. Therefore, "**Vocations Sunday**" is not for a few selected, it is for all of us here. On the one hand, each one needs to reflect on what my particular calling is and how I can respond to it for the well-being of the whole parish community. Secondly, I need to help and not be an obstacle to others in responding to the particular calling or grace that God through his Spirit is giving them. If we all actively responded to that call, what a wonderful community we would be! For, "We are his people, the sheep of his flock."

As we celebrate "**Good Shepherd Sunday**," let us ask the Lord that we may be his good sheep, listening attentively to his voice and following his example of self-giving love. Let us also pray for all our shepherds in the Church and society who are given the responsibility of caring for others. May they follow the example of Jesus who shows his concern and care for his own sheep and was willing to serve and lay down his life for his sheep.

In addition, as we celebrate "Vocation Sunday," we need more pastoral shepherds for our parish communities. Let us pray then for vocations to the priesthood, diaconate and religious life, that more people will consider whether they are being called to join the ranks of priest-shepherds or to the dedicated life of brothers and sisters.

Finally, we are challenged to realize the universal character of the flock of Jesus the Good Shepherd, by accepting one another, lovingly and without prejudice, and by serving the needs of all others without discrimination. Let us bear in mind always that "**WE ARE HIS PEOPLE, THE SHEEP OF HIS FLOCK**," and earnestly pray that we all be one in **HIM**.

In Christ,
Deacon Don