

Fourth Sunday of Easter--A

Homily.

When the church reorganized the Sunday readings after the Second Vatican Council, she chose readings for the first three weeks of Easter that focus on the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. For the remaining weeks of the Easter season, readings were chosen to help us look back at Jesus in the light of his resurrection. For the fourth Sunday of Easter, the readings speak of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, one who will risk his life to protect his sheep, and will lead them to the springs of life.

The image of the good shepherd emphasizes the costly, self-sacrificing love of Jesus that is at the heart of the Paschal mystery we are celebrating.

I have shared with you many times how I spent several months at our Jesuit retreat center in North Wales, and that the center was surrounded by sheep farms. Fourteen years ago, when I was in Israel, the place where I stayed overlooked a valley where shepherds would gather their sheep together and lead them into a sheepfold for the night. I have had time to watch sheep and shepherds, and everything I saw affirmed that the details in the psalms and parables about sheep and shepherds are true.

The main image Jesus uses in today's gospel, the image of himself as the gate of the sheepfold, is significant. Sheepfolds are very common at the edge of cities and towns all around Israel and the West Bank even today. They are circular and generally made of stone, though for some poorer villages they are simply made of briars or briar bushes. They have one rather small opening. Several shepherds will lead their flocks

into the one fold, and then the shepherds take turns sitting or lying in the opening for the night. The shepherd himself is the gate, preventing any of the sheep from wandering out, and more importantly, preventing any predator from entering and attacking the sheep. The shepherd literally puts his body on the line to protect his sheep.

In using this image, Jesus tells us two things about himself. First, he loves us and cares for us, and so leads us to the place where we can be safe and secure. The true fold is his kingdom. In its perfection, that will be the true garden of Eden, our heavenly home. But even here on earth, as the kingdom is being built, our imperfect fold is the church. It is the community of believers. Jesus has led us here to be safe from all that threatens us.

That is why the scandal about some priests abusing children is so terrible. These men have failed to be good shepherds following the example Jesus has given us. And if any bishop knowingly put children at risk to protect such a priest, or the image of the Church, he too failed to be a Christ-like shepherd.

But Jesus tells us more. He tells us that as a good shepherd, because he loves his sheep, he will take great risks to save and protect his sheep. Often the good shepherd is pictured as carrying a small lamb in his arms. And this is appropriate because Jesus has a very special love for children. But in the parable of the good shepherd, who leaves the ninety-nine to go in search of the one that was lost, it is a sheep, not a lamb that he finds and carries back to the flock. The earliest images we have of Jesus are images of the good shepherd, and in these images, the shepherd staggers under the weight of a full grown sheep held over his shoulders. It is an image of self sacrificing love. As tired as the shepherd is, he carries the sheep because it is tired and afraid.

And he makes himself the gate to the sheepfold, ready to face any predator that might attack the sheep. The good shepherd risks injury and even death, to protect each and every one of his sheep.

Both in Wales and in Israel, I noticed another phenomenon. The sheep recognize their master's voice, and they will only follow him. Every morning, each shepherd comes to the fold, one by one. And as each calls out, his sheep separate from the others and come out to follow him or her. That is why the shepherds do not hesitate to put their flocks together in the same fold for the night. They know that their sheep and only their sheep will come out when they call. Sheep recognize their master's call and they follow him wherever he leads them.

But Jesus goes even further. He tells us that he knows each of his sheep by name. This is something that I did not witness myself, but those who have studied this matter tell me that in the Middle East, sheep and goats are more like pets than simply livestock, and that each animal has a name. Newborns are often raised in the house, like a pet. They are raised primarily for milk and wool, and rarely raised simply for food. And so Jesus tells us, that as his sheep, he knows each of us by name; each one of us is very important to him.

The image of the good shepherd speaks very strongly to us of God's personal and self-sacrificing love for us. Jesus is our shepherd and protecting gate.

But today's readings also speak about us and our response to the Lord and Christ, the Messiah, who loves us so much.

In our first reading, St. Peter's words rouse the crowd that first Pentecost to say: what are we to do? That's the question. How do we respond to a Lord who has loved us so much? We listen to God's word and allow that word to take root in our hearts. The word deepens our faith, and faith leads us to follow his example.

Today, we are asked to pray for vocations. Vocation comes from the word "vocare," "to call." The good shepherd calls each one of us by name and asks us to follow him, to be his disciple. We know Jesus is the good shepherd and that he leads us to everlasting life. So we have every reason to trust him and to follow where he leads us.

That means that as his disciples, we don't simply say, what do I want to do with my life. I say, what does the Lord want me to do with my life? This is what it means when we address Jesus as Lord, as the Christ. We acknowledge him as our good shepherd.

One of the great gifts that God has given to the church through our patron, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, are the rules for the discernment of spirits, ways of listening to the Holy Spirit, learning to recognize His voice, and following him.

Sheep learn very early that their survival depends on knowing and responding to the voice of the shepherd. We must learn to do the same. Our eternal survival depends on recognizing and following Him where he leads.