

4TH SUNDAY OF EASTER – GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY– YEAR A

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is “Good Shepherd Sunday.” Each year, on this Sunday, we listen to part of Jesus’ discourse on the ‘Good Shepherd,’ taken from the Gospel of John.

The image of the shepherd is an ancient one, with deep roots in the Old Testament. God revealed himself to be the Shepherd of Israel, as we read in Psalm 23:

“The Lord is my Shepherd,
I shall not want.
Fresh and green are the pastures where he gives me repose.
Near restful waters he leads me,
to revive my drooping spirit.”

This Sunday’s passage features two short parables that relate to shepherds and sheep gates. These particular parables are somewhat different from the one we are most familiar with. That parable, which is recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, presents an image of Jesus, carrying the lost sheep on his shoulders. That image emphasises Jesus’ loving care, as well as his relentless determination to rescue the lost, “ your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.” (Matt 18:14).

We should not be surprised however that there is more than one Good Shepherd parable. St. John himself teaches that if everything Jesus said and did were recorded, “the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.” (Jn 21:25) It is entirely reasonable therefore that Jesus, during his three years of active ministry, would have used this image many times and in many different ways.

In the Good Shepherd parables recorded by St. John, Jesus reveals three dimensions of his mission that while distinct are also intimately woven together. He does this by making use of 3 interlinked images: first the image of the ‘gate’; second the image of the ‘shepherd;’ and third the image of the ‘gatekeeper.’

Why does Jesus choose the image of the gate?

To help us understand this image it would be helpful if we first considered the functions of the gate. The gate functions firstly as a portal. It is the legitimate way into the sheepfold. Secondly, when it is closed, it creates a clear boundary between those outside the sheepfold and those inside it. We must enter therefore through the gate.

Speaking of Jesus’ use of this image, the great Catholic evangelist, Bishop Fulton Sheen declared, “He did not say there are many gates, nor that it made little difference through which other gate one sought the higher life; He did not say He

was a gate, but The Gate... He claimed for himself the sole right of admission or rejection with respect to the true fold of God." ⁽¹⁾

The gate of the sheepfold is Jesus of Nazareth, and it is through him alone that we gain direct access to the Father, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) Behind this gate lies the 'true fold' of God, that is his Church, the kingdom of God on earth, "The... beginning of the Kingdom are the 'little flock' of those whom Jesus came to gather around him, the flock whose shepherd he is." ⁽²⁾

The second image used by Jesus is that of the 'shepherd', who enters by the 'gate.' It is the trusted shepherd who enters through the gate and then leads the sheep out. And the sheep follow him because they know his voice. This expression, "to lead out," recalls how Joshua was appointed to lead Israel out of the wilderness (Numbers 27:17) and how Yahweh promised to rescue the lost sheep of Israel, leading them out from their exile among the nations. (Ezekial 34:13) Although we do not hear Jesus say the words today, in the next verse he proclaims, "I am the good shepherd." (John 10:11) Jesus is the true shepherd who has, "come so that they may have life and have it to the full." (John 10:10)

One distinguishing characteristic of these parables in John's Gospel is their particular emphasis on the relationship between Jesus and each individual disciple, "one by one he calls his own sheep," (John 10:3) "I know my sheep and my sheep know me." (John 10:14) In Baptism Jesus calls each of us by name for, "The LORD knows those who are his," (2 Timothy 2:19) but it is those of us who hear his voice and remain true to him, who follow where he leads. "They never follow a stranger but run away from him: they do not recognise the voice of strangers." (John 10:5)

Pope Benedict teaches that the shepherd knows the sheep because they belong to him, not as property but as family. They remain free and yet, they belong to one another ⁽³⁾, "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (Jn 17:3).

Because he would ultimately return to the Father, Jesus appointed Apostles, who, guided by the Holy Spirit, would be trustworthy shepherds of his people. In this way his promise that, "I will not leave you orphaned," (John 14:18) would be fulfilled in the life of his Church.

It is now that the meaning of the third image, that of the 'gatekeeper,' becomes clearer. The gatekeeper is the one who judges the worthiness of any prospective shepherd. He it is, who grants entry to the fold and access to the sheep, to those who have been proven worthy. Jesus is the one who establishes the criterion by which every true shepherd should be identified, "The proof of a true shepherd is that he enters through Jesus as the door. For in this way it is ultimately Jesus who is the Shepherd - the flock "belongs" to him alone." ⁽⁴⁾

The mechanism that Jesus instituted for this purpose is Apostolic Succession, ' the Apostles were the first budding-forth of the New Israel, and at the same time the beginning of the sacred hierarchy.' ⁽⁵⁾ By means of Apostolic Succession, Jesus as gatekeeper ensures that, 'The Church... continues to be taught, sanctified and guided by the apostles until Christ's

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return, through their successors in pastoral office: the college of bishops, 'assisted by priests, in union with the successor of Peter, the Church's supreme pastor.' ⁽⁶⁾

We can rest confidently therefore, knowing that, 'In the ecclesial service of the ordained minister, it is Christ himself who is present to his Church as Head of his Body, Shepherd of his flock.' ⁽⁷⁾

Notes:

- (1) Sheen, F. (1958), *The Life of Christ*, Image Books, London, p.263
- (2) *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: No. 764
- (3) Benedict xvi, *Jesus of Nazareth*, (2007), p.280-281
- (4) Benedict xvi, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 2007, p.276
- (5) *Ad Gentes: On the Missionary activity of the Church*, (1965), No.5
- (6) *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 857
- (7) *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No.1548