

Sunday April 25th, 2021

Fourth Sunday of Easter Parishioner Reflection

World Day of Prayer for Vocations

By: Edel Reid

The Sunday Gospel readings since Easter so far have all recounted the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to his apostles and other followers. In the verses chosen for this Sunday's Gospel, however, John the Evangelist records the words of Jesus spoken during one of His last journeys to Jerusalem, prior to his death and resurrection. The discourse is on a very important theme: that of The Good Shepherd and His flock. St. John refers to this particular Good Shepherd teaching as a 'paroimia' (John 10:6) as opposed to a 'parable'. Paroimia was the Greek word used to describe "a figure of speech". We know that Jesus deliberately taught in parables and paroimias so as to enable "His own" to understand him, while sending his enemies into a tailspin. Shepherds tending their flocks are few and far between in the urbanized 21st century pastures around Aurora; but since Jesus' words are meant for all time, and indeed Our Lord said "Heaven and Earth will pass away but My words will not pass away", we can be certain that the paroimia of The Good Shepherd is as important and relevant to us today in our own "domestic and parish sheepfolds" as it was to Jesus' followers over 2000 years ago.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus uses imagery to gradually reveal His true identity and messianic mission: I am the Vine; I am the Bread of Life; I am Living Water; I am the Gate, the Door, the Cornerstone and so on. In the teaching of the Good Shepherd, Jesus employs perhaps the most loving image in the whole gospel to describe Himself. When Jesus says: "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep," yes, He is prophesying his own death, but He is also very poignantly telling us how much He loves us.

Why did Jesus choose shepherds, sheep, wolves, and hired help as imagery for this important teaching? To answer this, as with so much of Our Lord's teaching, it is helpful to do two things: take ourselves back to First Century Palestine; and equip ourselves with knowledge of relevant Old Testament passages.

First, by invoking the imagery of shepherd and sheep, Jesus is drawing upon his contemporaries' everyday experience in that culture. Sheep were a precious commodity in the ancient world. The crowd around Him would have known that the relationship between a shepherd and his sheep was an intimate, trusting, and life-saving relationship. Scholars who have studied this time have commented that in the middle of most towns there would have been a "sheepfold": a circular stone

enclosure with only one entrance/exit where a gatekeeper would be posted. In fact, some scholars even suggest that the gatekeeper lay across the entrance throughout the night to ensure that no one got in, and no sheep got out. Thieves would have had to climb over the walls. Sheep from various flocks would spend the night in the sheepfold under the gatekeeper's tight security. In the morning, when a shepherd wanted to lead the sheep of his particular flock out to pasture, he would stand at the gate and call each of his sheep by name and they would follow. We think of sheep as nondescript and all the same; but a shepherd would know each and every one of his sheep individually, and in turn each sheep would know its own shepherd (its true shepherd) by the sound of his voice. The sheep who didn't recognize that particular shepherd's voice would ignore his commands. A good shepherd could legitimately say: "I know my own and my own know me", (John 10:14). Jesus' audience knew all this. They also knew that a shepherd was never happy if even one sheep wandered away, and a sheep that rambled off out of earshot of his shepherd's voice, looking for greener pastures, put himself at risk of getting mired down in mud, entangling himself in briar or bramble, or even getting lost forever.

Second, Jesus is drawing on Old Testament symbolism known to most of his audience, and certainly to the Scribes and Pharisees, to make His point. During the Easter Season, the Church does not have the usual Old Testament reading at Mass; however, I think it's helpful to be aware that shepherds and sheep were a significant Old Testament theme. Some ancient spiritual leaders were actually shepherds (King David among others), while political and spiritual leaders were often referred to as shepherds in the scriptures. (Isaiah 56:11, Jeremiah 3:15, Ezekiel 34:2-6, 10-16). Tending flocks of sheep became an analogy for guiding God's people. It didn't always work out, and the prophet Ezekiel railed against bad shepherds (leaders and priests) who took care of themselves while their flocks starved, were scattered, and lost. The abuse from these "wolves" got so bad that God Himself, through the words of the prophet, had to intervene and declare Himself the Shepherd. "I will rescue them [the sheep] from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness" "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep".(Ezekiel 34:11ff).

With this background, let's look at what Jesus is really teaching us. In declaring Himself the Good Shepherd, even Jesus' followers at the time realized that not only is Jesus claiming to be a spiritual leader, He is claiming equality with the God of the Old Testament. The Church teaches us (and Vatican II document, Lumen Gentium confirms) that The Good Shepherd represents the founder of the Church; the sheepfold enclosure represents the Church itself; the sheep represent the faithful. The sheep that Jesus refers to that "do not belong to this fold" are the Gentiles whom Jesus clearly

intends to bring into the fold so there will be “one flock, one shepherd”. Jesus is already foreshadowing the establishment of His Church.

Which brings me directly to the second part of this reflection; that is, namely, World Day of Prayer for Vocations.

In researching for this reflection, I learned that shepherds at the time would certainly take major risks for the safety of the sheep, but probably would not willingly die for them because in fact that would have left the rest of the flock vulnerable to wolves and other dangers. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who was to lay down His life for His sheep, never intended to leave his flock vulnerable after his death. He knew He would establish His Church after His Resurrection which in turn would provide priests to shepherd the flock.

Our priests are *alter Christus*, they stand in for Christ Himself. We, the faithful flock, are led by these human shepherds. Pope Francis often exhorts our priests today to have the heart of a shepherd. Appearing on the shores of the Sea of Galilee after his Resurrection, Jesus instructed Peter, the first Pope, to “feed my lambs.....feed my sheep”, thereby conferring on him “shepherd” status (John 21:15-17). The Church is the ultimate sheepfold, yes, but our parish is our local sheepfold, and our home a domestic sheepfold. In a way everyone has this vocation - we are all called to live with the heart of a shepherd, to seek out the lost and to tend and care for our neighbour from the youngest lambs to the full-grown sheep. Is there someone we know that we ourselves could gently, humbly shepherd? They may not even be in our fold. Some of the earliest, most beautiful images rendered in art of Jesus as the Good Shepherd (paintings on catacomb walls for instance) show Him carrying an injured or lost lamb back to the fold on His shoulders. Who among us has never felt like a lost sheep? Who among us has not wandered away at some point in our life out of earshot of the Good Shepherd’s voice? The good news is that we can never be too far away. He is calling us each by name; He knows us; He will seek us out and carry us home.

In this most recent lockdown, we are discouraged from wandering too far from home. There are a lot of locked doors everywhere. The doors to our domestic sheepfolds, our homes, are closed and locked; but as Fr. Eduardo said in last Sunday’s sermon, Jesus [our Shepherd] is not under lockdown. No locked door can keep him out. Think back to the apostles’ experience after Easter: they were behind closed doors, locked doors, afraid. What were they afraid of? Ultimately, they were afraid of death. While behind those closed doors, they prayed and kept their ears open like good sheep for the voice of their shepherd, even in the midst of their depression and fear. Defying all locked doors, Jesus came and stood among them.

While we are behind closed doors, let's pray like never before; let's not let the wolves in; let's keep our ears open and listen out for the one true shepherd's voice. Then we will know we are being led in the right direction.

Note the following sources were used in preparing for this reflection: Bishop Robert Barron; Fr. Alex Brito, EP; Msgr. Cla Dias, EP; Dr. Brant Pitre.