

Fourth Sunday of Easter Good Shepherd Sunday May07, 2017

Readings: Acts 2:14a.36-41; 1 Peter 2:20b-25; John 10:1-10

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is generally termed as the Good Shepherd Sunday in our new Catholic liturgical calendar. In recent times this day has also become known as Vocations Sunday, a day on which prayers should be said for vocations to the priesthood and religious life. The image of God as the shepherd of his people has a long tradition in the history of God's people. The image of the shepherd is one which appears several times in the New Testament. It is one that would be immediately understood by the people of the time. In the Gospel of John Jesus calls himself as the Good Shepherd and promises to take care of the sheep entrusted to his care. We have the popular images of Jesus the Good Shepherd carrying a sheep over his shoulders, or we have a smiling Jesus sitting under a tree, with a little lamb on his lap. This image of the shepherd appeals to us because it shows the tenderness of Jesus and his compassion. A shepherd in those days walked ahead of the sheep seeking out a safe path taking them to the pastures, water and shelter. The sheep followed him, because they recognized his voice, and they trusted him. An image of Jesus as a Good Shepherd is reassuring us that he is always our support on our journey through life. When we encounter difficulties in our life's path and face serious problems the presence of Jesus the Good Shepherd reassures us that we are not abandoned, that Jesus is supporting and holding us up. The Psalm 23 assures us that the God as the Good Shepherd will lead his sheep to green pastures, will give repose and it will not want anything because he the shepherd is always there as a comforter.

Today's First Reading from the Acts of the Apostles gives us a call to penance and conversion. When Pentecost had come, Peter filled with the Spirit stood before the crowd and told them that they must repent. He called them to turn away from their sins and accept a new life. The teaching of the Apostles and particularly that of Peter touched their hearts and the people asked them what they ought to do. Peter explains to them how the people of God had rejected Jesus as their Messiah and the Gentiles continued to worship idols. Both greatly displeased God. Peter also told the crowd that each and every one of them should be baptized in the Name of Jesus. The Baptism of Jesus was superior to that of John the Baptist because it gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit and allowed them to pronounce the saving Name of Jesus. There was an immediate response from the people who heard Peter. He told them that through the Sacrament of Baptism, they would receive the forgiveness of their sins. The reading tells us that

through Baptism and repentance the new converts were added to the number of the elect, thus providing them with the assurance of the promised salvation.

In the second reading of today Peter stresses the importance of sufferings in Christian life. Suffering is part and parcel of human nature and everyone has to bear the suffering in his life. He tells the Christian Community that by his suffering Christ gave us an example of accepting them and he has called us to follow his path. He points to the fact that though Christ did not commit any sin nor did he do anything wrong yet he suffered. He did not retaliate but endured everything for God who is the just judge and he will judge all in a just way. Peter then consoles his people saying that we are healed by his wounds, of the one who hung on the cross for us. He totally accepted our sinfulness and died on the cross for our sake. They have been led astray by our weakness but he the good shepherd and guardian has rightly brought them back. He is so concerned about them that he would bring them out to pasture each day and spend all his time with them. In the evening he would bring them back to the enclosure where they would be safe from preying animals. He knew each one individually and would notice immediately if even one was missing. That was the love of Jesus towards his sheep.

In today's Gospel passage, which is the only parable in the entire Gospel of John consists of the first 10 verses of Chapter 10. In this passage Jesus gives two comparisons. He compares himself to the Shepherd and to the Gate. The first title represents his ownership and he calls each sheep by name. They recognized his voice and stayed close to him. The second title represents His leadership. Jesus is the Gate, the door through which the sheep have an access to the shepherd. The first is a warning against people who would want to steal the sheep and the second focuses on the relationship between the sheep and their shepherd. The central image, too, is not so much that of the shepherd as of the gate. In fact, later on in the passage, Jesus says that he is the Gate of the sheepfold, while the shepherds who come in and out are pastors who are faithful to Jesus. Anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate, for instance, by climbing over the fence or breaking through it, is dangerous and should be avoided. Only a thief and a brigand who comes to steal and do harm to the sheep will not use the gate. The genuine shepherd, however, enters by the Gate and is recognized and admitted by the watchman outside. The true shepherd knows which ones belong to him and calls them out one by one. The sheep recognize the shepherd's voice and stay with him. They will not follow other shepherds, even if called by them.

It is a free relationship. They follow, not because they are forced to but by their own choice.

In this parable of the Good Shepherd, while stressing the intimate relationship between the shepherd and the sheep, Jesus says, he is the gate of the sheep. John in this passage presents the Divine title of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The sheep listen to his voice and recognise him as their shepherd and that is why they continue to follow him rather than another. Earlier Jesus had expressed that he is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. Since Jesus is the Good Shepherd and not a hired hand, he will stay with them and he is ready to give his life for his sheep. Jesus is certain that his sheep will not follow a stranger but only him the shepherd. Jesus the Good Shepherd gave his life for his sheep by dying on the cross. The Good Shepherd is the Lamb of God to take away the blemish of the world. The Lord of compassion promises to go and gather his sheep and bring them back to good pasture.

The shepherd of the biblical Middle East had close intimate relationship with a smaller flock. He would bring them out to pasture each day and spend all his time with them. Jesus says that as a shepherd he has a deep sense of commitment and responsibility towards his own. He is a leader who is concerned about the other and hence there is the attractiveness in him. Secondly there is the knowledge of the shepherd. Every good shepherd knows every one of his sheep and he is aware that his sheep also knows him. There is the mutual understanding, a bond of love and intimacy between them and the sheep acknowledges its shepherd. Thirdly, the good shepherd deeply desires that many other sheep should come to identify themselves with him. This in fact is the call of the kingdom of God that there may be one flock and one shepherd. Finally the good shepherd wishes to lay down his life for the sheep. We have a God who is ready to die for others and Jesus emphasizes that, in giving his life for his sheep, he is doing so of his own will. His death is to be the living proof that “the greatest love a person can show is to give one’s life for one’s friends”. This is the proof that Jesus truly is a Good Shepherd.

There are several references to sheep and shepherds in the Synoptic gospels. In the Gospel of Mark, we read Jesus being deeply moved by compassion because the crowd was “like sheep without a shepherd”. In Luke we have the mercy parable where we see him going in search of the lost sheep. In Matthew, he speaks of false prophets, who are really wolves, but come in sheep’s clothing. In the final judgment, the good and bad are identified with sheep and goats respectively. In the Gospel of John we see him as the Good Shepherd caring for

his sheep. In the Old Testament we have the passage in Ezekiel where the shepherds of Israel are condemned for their betrayal of their responsibilities and where God himself promises to take over the gentle care of his flock. Through his compassionate care of them, God's people "will know that I, the Lord their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people... And you are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, says the Lord God". There is the personal care of God towards his people. The Psalm 23 summarizes the role of God as the Good Shepherd who cares for his sheep. The passage ends with one of Jesus' most beautiful statements: "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full." To follow Jesus is not, as some seem to fear, to live a half-life, a life filled with endlessly dire warnings of avoiding things. It is to live life, our human life, to the greatest possible fullness. In fact, the Gospel is a statement about how human life is best lived.

The readings of today are intimately linked with the second theme of this Sunday. Not only is it Good Shepherd Sunday, it is also "Vocations Sunday". On this day we are especially asked first of all to pray that the Church may be provided with the leaders needed to do its work of spreading the Gospel. We know that at the present time there is a critical shortage of such leaders, at least in the traditional sense – priests and religious. But, while we may earnestly pray that our Church is supplied with the leaders it needs, not merely as priests and religious but lay persons who would lead people to God. At the same time we must be clear of the term vocation. We have for too long given a much too narrow meaning to the word 'vocation'. We tend to limit it to a calling to be a priest or a member of a religious institute. But, in fact, every single one of us has a vocation, as we are being called by God to be spouses, parents, teachers, doctors, and civil servants, running a business, salespersons... or whatever. That is the calling which demands fidelity to God and to the task personally chosen. God is calling every single one of us to work for the Gospel. Today, the Church invites us to reflect on the meaning of God's call and to pray for vocations. It reminds us that the entire Christian community shares the responsibility for fostering vocations. Here the Church seeks to emphasize the beauty of the religious life through the consecration of one's mind, heart, body and soul as a religious brother or sister. While these dedicated individuals are not always in the forefront of the Church, they are the backbone of the Body of Christ.

As we celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday, let us pray to the Lord that we may be His good sheep, listening attentively to His voice, and follow His example of self-

giving love. Let us also pray for all our shepherds, especially our religious and political leaders. May they follow the example of Jesus who was willing to serve and lay down His life for His sheep. Jesus our Shepherd is the Way, Truth and Life. He is the one who goes after the lost sheep leaving the ninety-nine to bring it back to the fold. The church today insists that vocations are a responsibility of the Christian family. To foster vocations, the family must foster the Christian life. The family must live its faith in Christ on a daily basis in unity and prayer. The Church of Jesus fosters a living faith in the Christian family. Through such families, the grace of God is manifested and vocations flourish to ensure that the needs of the Church are all met. Today let us pray for vocations to the priesthood and religious life, that many will be inspired to show true love, to the point of sacrificing many other attractive options to become priests of Jesus, to follow him in religious life.

After Bible class, my co-teacher and I gave small bags of cookies to our pupils for Christmas. The children happily received their gifts, said thank you, and began eating as they walked away. As we were leaving, one boy shyly approached and asked for a bag for his brother who was disabled and was walking behind him with difficulty. The fragile boy called out, "Teacher, please wait for me." His brother ran to him and said, "I already thanked her for both of us. . . . Don't bother the teacher anymore." The boy took the gift but still made his way toward me. "I want to thank you myself because you are the one who really gave us the gifts," he said and lovingly kissed my hand. His words and sincere way of expressing gratitude reminded me of the Samaritan leper whom Jesus healed. Then I asked myself, how many of us Christians sometimes behave like the other nine lepers - slow to say "Thank you!" for gifts? And when we do feel grateful, whom do we thank first and most? While it is good to thank the people who help us, shouldn't we thank our loving God even more? After all, the Bible teaches us that everything and everyone belong to God.

Fr. Eugene Lobo S.J. Bangalore, India