

## **Fourth Sunday of Easter April 17, 2016 (Good Shepherd Sunday)**

Acts 13:14, 43-52; Revelation 7:9, 14b-17; John 10:27-30

Today is the Good Shepherd Sunday and the Vocation Sunday and the word of God presents us with two images, the Children of God and the Good Shepherd. In today's gospel passage Jesus emphasizes the sacrifice of his own self and his life itself indicating that he is the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. The scriptures tell us of the extraordinary love of God for us that has taken in Jesus in the form of a good shepherd. The image of the Good Shepherd was perhaps the favourite early Christian image of our Saviour and has a long tradition in the history of God's people. It is one that would be immediately understood by the people of the time. We have the popular pictures 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 general did not walk behind the flock beating them with a stick to keep them moving. He walked in front of them, seeking out a safe path to food and water and shelter and the sheep gently followed him, because they recognized his voice, and they trusted him. Jesus tells us that are the kind of Good Shepherd he is. He leads, and we follow.

When we see this image our minds naturally begin to wander and we realize its personal meaning for us. We are that lamb or sheep who is being carried by Jesus on his shoulders. Such an image is reassuring for us as Jesus is always our support on our journey through life. When we face difficult problems or crosses come our way or some personal disasters occur, the presence of Jesus the Good Shepherd reassures us that we are not abandoned, that Jesus is supporting and holding us up. This is portrayed very beautifully in the poem, Footprints which concludes in this way: "I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life there has only been one set of footprints in the sand. Why, when I needed you most, have you not been there for me?" The Lord replied, "The years when you have seen only one set of footprints, my child, is when I carried you." Again Psalm 23 reads: "The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want. Fresh and green are the pastures where He leads me repose ... Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for You are with me;

Your rod and Your staff – they comfort me.’ This in fact tells us who Jesus is and who we are all called to be.

The First Reading taken from the Acts of the Apostles, tells us how some of the people from the house of Israel were rejecting the grace of God and the mission to the gentiles begins. We have a brief description of the work of Paul in Antioch and Pisidia along with Barnabas during the first missionary journey. They preached as usual on the Sabbath day to the Jewish community there. The gentiles were also present and the Jews were jealous of the group. Consequently, Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, that the word of God was brought first to them the chosen people. Since they have rejected it the apostles were ready to move towards the Gentiles. Quoting Prophet Isaiah, Paul speaks of the universal mission to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and praised the Word of the Lord; and as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers. Paul and Barnabas were not crushed by this experience of rejection but rejoiced with joy and the Holy Spirit. They continued with their mission and at Antioch many accepted their message. By the grace of our Lord, those of us who have answered divine call to be saved have become one spiritual nation of God, without discrimination of nationality, race, culture, gender or age.

The Second Reading taken from the Book of Revelation, tells us of another vision of John in which he sees a countless number of saints who have earned heaven through martyrdom and are now serving God’s throne adoring him and rejoicing. They will not suffer and grieve again as they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Those persons who wear the white garments represent all the Christians who have been chosen by God; those who wear the white garments, they are the living saints who form the fullness of the mystical Body of Christ. The vision of John tells us that no matter how much suffering it may refer to, it is important for us to understand that it ends with a divine hope and promise. These persons have won the victory over their enemies. There will come a time when we will no longer hunger or thirst. The sun will no longer strike them or any of its scorching heat. The Lamb shall be their Shepherd and he will guide them to the springs of the water of life. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. John describes the victor’s condition in two ways: the one who sits on the throne shelters them,

protects them from all harm; the lamb takes care of them and relieves them from all sorrow.

The Gospel for this fourth Sunday of Easter is extremely short, but has great density of meaning. Previous to this passage Jesus enunciates his relationship to those who believe in him as the Good Shepherd who knows, loves and cares for his sheep. The context of the present passage is a controversy raised by the Jews over the real identity of Jesus. Their complaint is that, from their perspective, Jesus has not been forthcoming regarding his identity. In this passage the words are powerful, strong, and very rich in doctrine and in pastoral application. The words of the Lord can be read in the context in which Jesus pronounced them: during the Feast of the Dedication of the Temple, some time before the Passover when Christ was arrested and condemned to death. Jesus claims however that he has disclosed time and time again his real identity but his enemies have refused to understand and to believe. This was a matter of conflict which was not easy to resolve. To understand who Jesus really is, that he is the Messiah, requires deep faith. The opponents of Jesus did not have this faith and naturally they could not get his real identity. They could not understand his works and teaching.

But one can also read the words in the light of the Resurrection of the Lord, and in the fire of the Spirit of Pentecost. Jesus, the Living, the Resurrected, is eternal Life and he gives this life to his sheep: "I give them eternal life." Jesus is eternal Life, for he is God; and he gives eternal life, for, while he remains God, he is also, at the same time, Man: Jesus is the sole mediator between God and men. But, in his role as mediator, Jesus wanted to have partners. These partners are not his equals, for they are not God and Man as he is. But they are his servants: each one of them places his entire person at the service of Christ, and devotes himself, body and soul, to the Lord. Today, the risen Jesus is with the Father in the glory and splendour, and he with the Father is sending the Spirit of Love and Peace to the entire world. The Holy Spirit teaches all who truly allow themselves to be taught, he reminds them of all that Jesus said to his disciples while he lived on the earth: "The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." (Jn. 14:26) Jesus knows absolutely all the men and women whom the Father loves and wants to save for eternal life.

During today's Gospel Reading Jesus uses the image of the Shepherd and the sheep. The relationship between the shepherd and the sheep is so intimate that it is an extension of the relationship between the Heavenly Father and the Son. We heard the words of Jesus: "My sheep hear my voice and follow me." In this particular passage from the Gospel of John, Jesus was speaking of His Divine title as the Good Shepherd. The sheep listen to and recognise the voice of their shepherd and that is why they continue to follow him rather than another. It is important for us also to recognise the voice of Jesus as it comes to us in our daily life. Earlier in the same Chapter, Jesus had said, "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Since Jesus is the Good Shepherd and not a hired hand, he does not run away when the wolf comes, instead he is ready to give his life for his sheep. On the other hand the hired person runs away when the wolf comes, leaving the sheep in danger. Jesus the Good Shepherd shepherded to the point of giving his life for his sheep, dying on the cross for the sake of humanity. The Good Shepherd became the Lamb of God to take away the blemish of the world.

Jesus as a shepherd shows 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 that his sheep knows him and he knows his own sheep. There is the mutual understanding and love between them. This mutual bond of love and intimacy is often compared to the mutual relationship between Jesus and his Father. The shepherd knows his sheep 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." In this sense an invitation for the universe to be united together with its God and Lord. 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.

Jesus is the good shepherd caring for his sheep. We see here: Work of the Shepherd – to rescue them, to lead them home, to feed them, to search out the lost ones and the least ones, to guide them, defend and protect them,

treat with affection. The knowledge of the Shepherd – he knows them, loves them, he knows each by name personally. When he calls the sheep by name and they come. He is the door for them. `They are mine` he says as they personally belong to him. The aim and dedication is to lay down his life for the sheep not just once but forever. He wants them always to belong to him. The zeal of the Shepherd is to get other sheep. There are not in the fold. He wants all of them. He came in search of the lost ones, Luke 19, 10. The manner in which the Shepherd works is with compassion and hard work. He is the person who is never tired but is ready to work at all times.

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. 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.

God our Father is the true Good Shepherd. He is present everywhere watching over all creatures! His care is for everyone and his Love has no limit. He watches over each of his children with equal care! All that he desires is that we go to him, in Christ, in order that we too might be one with him. If we are one with Christ, then we will be able to say, like the Lord: "I and the Father are one." In fact, it is not we, who will speak this word, but rather Christ who will speak it for us, for only he is the equal of God, being God himself. But, in order for Jesus to be able to speak on our behalf, let us receive him within us, during today's Holy Communion. Let us ask Mary, our mother to help us to receive within us the Lord, King of the Universe.

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.

Fr Pedro Arrupe former General of the Society of Jesus was the Novice Master in Japan during the Second World War. We may recall the situation of the 1940s when Hiroshima and Nagasaki were bombed and thousands died and many more were wounded particularly due to radiation. During this time Fr Arrupe converted the novitiate into a hospital and with the medical knowledge he possessed he helped thousands who came for treatment. One day he saw a little girl wounded badly due to radiation and when he tried to clean her wounds and remove some of the clothes, her skin and flesh came out with them. She had already been attacked by ants and rats and half eaten. With tears in his eyes he tried his best to wash her wounds and it was impossible. He just stood there close to her and prayed. The girl slowly opened her eyes and looked at him and smiled. She asked him: "Father, have you brought the communion for me." With tears in his eyes he nodded yes and then she received the communion and died peacefully.

A shepherd boy was tending a few sheep on the side of a mountain. One day while wandering in the wilderness, he came to a huge cave. There was a door to the cave and it was closed. And as he was looking around, he noticed a very beautiful flower. The boy knelt down and pulled out the flower in his hands. He was admiring it when suddenly there was a loud noise. He looked up and saw the doors to the cave opening up right before his eyes. There were bright lights that shine from the inside of the mountain. With the flower in his hands, the shepherd boy rushed inside. And his eyes widened because he saw piles of sparkling gold, diamonds, precious stones and jewellery. He began to gather them in his arms. Finally, the boy turned and started to leave the cave. Suddenly a voice said

to him, "Don't forget the best." Thinking that perhaps he had overlooked some choice piece of treasure, the boy turned around and quickly picked up additional pieces of priceless treasure. As he began to run out of the mountain cave the voice said, "Don't forget the best." But the boy's arms were filled, and he hurried outside. All of a sudden, there was a loud noise. The boy looked around and saw the mountain cave closing its doors. A third time the shepherd boy heard the voice, and this time it said, "You forgot the best. For the beautiful flower is the key to the vault of the mountain."

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