

Fourth Sunday of Easter [Good Shepherd Sunday/Vocation Sunday] April 26, 2015

Acts 4:8-12; 1 John 3:1-2; John 10:11-18

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 self-sacrificing element in his own life that he is the good shepherd who is laying down his life for his sheep. He contrasts the good shepherd who owns the sheep to someone who is simply hired to look after them. The scriptures tell us of the extraordinary love of God for us has taken in Jesus the form of the 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 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. The second reading places before us the image of the Children of God telling us how closely we are linked to the Father in Jesus Christ. Considering these images, in recent times this day has been known as Vocations Sunday, a day on which we are called upon to pray for vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Jesus came to earth to proclaim the Kingdom of God. Now he elicits human help to proclaim the Good News to the World and fulfil his mission by calling young people who can exercise their human and personal abilities to carry on the work of God.

In the first reading of today we heard how Peter and John answered to those in authority about their calling to serve Jesus. Having been arrested for preaching the resurrection of the Lord after the healing of the cripple, they stood before the rulers, the elders and the scribes to account for their actions. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter answered that his actions of good works were performed in the Name of Jesus Christ who had been crucified and now raised from the dead by God. The apostle assured them that the former cripple was healed in the name of the resurrected Jesus. But the benefits of the resurrection of Jesus go far beyond the healing of one man. The work of salvation fulfilled in Jesus is extended to the whole world. Using the opportunity that was available to testify in the Holy Name of Jesus, Peter added that Jesus, the Stone that was rejected by the authorities, the builders, had become the Cornerstone. There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other Name under Heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved. Peter informed the builders of God's people that they had erred in their interpretation of the Scriptures regarding the coming of the Messiah. As the leaders of the people, they had rejected Jesus, the promised Messiah, He who was the Cornerstone of God's people, the Church. The power of that kingdom is plainly visible in the former cripple who stood before them perfectly sound.

In the Second Reading of today John reminds his disciples of the depth of love of God the Father for us that results in our being called his children. Eventually they will see God face to face as he is in the life to come and their status will reach new heights. We shall be glorified like the risen Christ and we shall see God as he is, not through the veil of faith as we see him now but in reality. Already here on earth by joining our human nature to the divine person of Christ he has united us in a special relationship with himself and has made us his own children. The world stands for those who refuse to believe. Their unbelief prevents them from knowing God or his children. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know Jesus. These worldly minds fail to perceive the beauty of self-denial and self-giving in the love of God. Those of the world do not understand those who give themselves to the religious life because, contrary to their claims, they do not know Jesus. As God's children

know, we do not know what we will be like after the resurrection of the bodies because it has not been revealed to us. What we do know is that we will be like Jesus glorified. During our eternal life, we will not have a physical form because Jesus no longer has a physical body. This is known by the fact that he is no longer physically present in this world in human form. Nor will we be spirits because Jesus and the Holy Spirit are two separate Divine Presences in God.

In today's Gospel passage, we have the parable of the Good Shepherd, which is the only parable in the entire Gospel of John. In this parable Jesus the Good Shepherd stresses the intimate relationship between the shepherd and the sheep. This passage unfolds around two references wherein Jesus refers to himself as the good shepherd. More important is the phrase "I am," which precedes the title good shepherd. These so called I am sayings in John are the characteristic formula of the self-revelation of Jesus. It also indicates the intimate connection between Jesus and the Father and at the same time designates how this revelation meets the basic needs and desires of those to whom he was sent. Such is the case with the good shepherd whose concern is the people. In this passage Jesus emphasizes the self-sacrificing element in his own life, namely, as a good shepherd he is ready to lay down his life for his sheep. He contrasts the good shepherd who owns the sheep to someone who is simply hired to look after the sheep. The fundamental difference is that the hired person has no investment in the sheep. He is paid to watch after them but because they are not his, he is unwilling to endure any danger to protect and care for them. He thinks primarily of his own welfare and, if he sees a wolf coming, he takes off, leaving the sheep to be attacked and scattered in fear and terror. Many commentators understand this hired person to represent the Jewish leaders who had rejected Jesus as being the revelation of God and thereby misled the people. Jesus, on the other hand, will not be like a hired person but is the good shepherd because he chooses to lay down his life for his sheep. This is to be understood from the background of Ezekiel Chapter 34, which describes God as the good shepherd. An image of Jesus as a Good Shepherd is reassuring us that he is always our support on our journey through life.

The second part of the passage stresses the intimate and reciprocal knowledge that exists between Jesus and those who believe in him. Again this is what it means to be a good shepherd. The good shepherd knows his sheep and they know him. There is a mutual bond of love and intimacy. This mutual knowledge and love that Jesus shares with believers is based on the divine mutuality and his personal relationship with his Father. He tells the disciples that his own know him intimately just as the Father knows him. Again the hired man who is only a paid servant will not have such a relationship with his charges. So loving and caring is the Good Shepherd that when He sees one of His sheep is missing, He will leave the ninety-nine who are safe to go and find His missing sheep. 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.

Somewhat surprisingly Jesus expresses his wish to expand his flock beyond the present fold. The good shepherd deeply desires that many other sheep should come to identify themselves with him. He says that there are other sheep that are not of his fold and these he has to lead as well. This could refer to Jews, Gentiles or both. His zeal is to extend his flock far beyond the existing one, making his ultimate goal to have only one flock, and he will be the only shepherd. Whatever is the implication, the meaning is that the flock of Jesus is inclusive and not exclusive. With this the whole world will be united together with its God and Lord. Jesus is willing to lay down his life for his sheep but is by no means a victim. He chooses freely to lay down his life as the ultimate revelation of his Father's love. This is the meaning of the

Kingdom which is at the heart of today's Gospel message. One thing is certain that the sheep follows him because they recognized his voice, and they trust him.

Jesus uses the imagery of the shepherd from the ordinary usage of life and calls himself the Good Shepherd. During the time of Jesus the shepherd of the Middle East had close intimate relationship with a smaller flock. The Shepherd was in charge of them and would lead them out to pasture daily while spending all his time with them. He took personal care of them and Jesus says that he had a deep sense of commitment and responsibility towards his own sheep. He was concerned about the sheep and hence they had the attraction towards him. Every good shepherd knew every one of his sheep by name and he was aware that his sheep also knew him. This showed the intimate knowledge of the shepherd. There was the mutual understanding, a bond of love and intimacy between them and the sheep acknowledged its shepherd. When they were lost he went in search of them and carried them on his shoulders and brought them to the flock. The image of Christ as a good shepherd has always appealed human nature. One of the earliest paintings of Christ in the Roman catacombs represents him as carrying an injured sheep on his shoulders. This is a manifestation of love which touches our innermost feelings. Finally a good shepherd risked his life to protect his sheep from all dangers. In the same way we have a God who is ready to die for his people and Jesus emphasizes that his death was the living proof of his sacrificing for the sake of those he loved. This is the proof that Jesus truly is a Good Shepherd.

As we celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday, let us ask the Lord that we may be his good sheep, listening attentively to his voice, and follow his example of self-giving love. Jesus gives us the example of a good shepherd who shows his concern and care for his own sheep. The Lord of compassion promises to go and gather his sheep and bring them back to good pasture. This is the time we pray for all our shepherds in the church and society who are given the responsibility of caring for others. Here we have Jesus as our model and who offered to sacrifice his life for his chosen ones. Jesus the Good Shepherd is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He is the one who goes after the lost sheep leaving the ninety-nine to bring it back to the fold. This Sunday, also the Vocation Sunday we are asked to pray for many and good vocations to continue the work of the Shepherd. The church 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 our community, leading us to the Father through Jesus. Here the grace of God is manifested which will help vocations to 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.

Today's two images, of our being children of God and of Jesus as the good shepherd, teach us of the love and care of God. They also suggest some corresponding attributes which the followers of Jesus should have, namely, compassion, insight, care, fidelity, recognition and love. As God's creatures we are a reflection of his being and as his children we are God's own family. On this day we are especially asked to pray that the Church may be provided with the leaders needed to do its work of spreading the Gospel. As we pray for more vocations in the church, we remember those who answer their religious calling have a duty to safeguard the faith of the children of God, the believers of the Church. When they see a lost child who has been misled away from the Body of Christ, they have an obligation to reach out to this child so he or she may be reconciled with God, with the Church and with the faithful. This will ensure that every child shall bear spiritual fruits. This is the duty of every

baptized person and not merely of those who have embraced religious or priestly life. God is calling every single one of us to work for the Gospel. When God calls us to make my own unique contribution based on the particular talents God has given me we must be ready to serve him in whichever vocation he has generously given us. As we continue with the celebration of the Holy Mass, may our minds be strengthened by the Word of God and the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist that we are about to receive. We humbly ask our Heavenly Father for his grace so we may be blessed with religious vocations to fruitfully continue the ministry of Jesus Christ among His children.

Once a man had gone for his weekly market fair and was returning home happy with the purchases he had made. It was pretty dark and the path was very narrow. My mistake he slipped and fell in the pond filled with muck and it was extremely cold. However much he tried to come out he could not and worse still he went on sinking in the muck. He though his end was near yet kept on shouting. To his good fortune a man was passing that way in a cart and when he heard the cries he stopped. He threw a rope to the man and tied it to his horse and with delicacy and difficulty he pulled out the man. Then he took the near unconscious man to his home, washed him of the muck and wrapped him in the blanket. The man recovered in couple of days and wished to go home. The man who had fallen thanked his benefactor for the favor done and asked what his name was. The man replied that he had no need of it and he should relax and go. When the person still insisted the good man asked him a question, whether he knew the story of the Good Samaritan in the Bible. The man responded positively. Then the Benefactor responded that if he could tell him the name of the Good Samaritan then he would reveal his name. The man thought a while and said it is not recorded in the Bible. Nor will I tell you mine, the man replied. Kindly go and pray for me and be a Good Samaritan.

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