

4th Sunday of Easter (B) 2018

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

Today, the 4th Sunday of Easter, is designated "Good Shepherd Sunday," as we all know. The gospel is of St. John, presenting Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

The theme of shepherd in the OT will lead us into the NT. Very early in the OT God is named as shepherd, as when Jacob speaks of "the God who has been my shepherd from my birth to this day" (Gen 48:15). Or Isaiah says of Him, "Like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, Carrying them in his bosom, and leading the ewes with care" (Isa 40:11).

More frequently the OT speaks of a man that God appoints to that role. We think of David especially. Of him the psalmist says, "From tending sheep God brought him, to shepherd Jacob, his people, Israel, his heritage. He shepherded them with a pure heart, with skilled hands he guided them" (Ps 78:71-72). And of course from David we have that wonderful 23rd psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd."

But David was only a forerunner for a greater figure, who in turn prefigured the one who was to come. This one who was to come arises not from the line of Judah's kings but from the place of David's family origin. God says, from "Bethlehem Ephrathah ... shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel; whose origin is from of old, from ancient times.... He shall take his place as shepherd ... his greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth" (Mic 5:1-3).

As the monarchy neared its end prophets spoke of a future Davidic figure who would be shepherd to the people "I will appoint one shepherd over them to pasture them, my servant David; he shall pasture them and be their shepherd. I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David will be prince in their midst" (Ezek 34:23-24).

Ezekiel pictures Israel's return from exile in terms of shepherding. First he excoriates Israel's kings and rulers as bad shepherds who have abandoned their flock, have pastured themselves; then God declares that He Himself will be Israel's shepherd: "As a shepherd tends his flock ... so will I tend my sheep. I will rescue them from every place where they were scattered when it was cloudy and dark. ... The lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal, ... shepherding them rightly" (Ezek 34:12, 16).

This text could be the inspiration for the parable Jesus told of the man who left 99 sheep in the desert to seek the one that had strayed--a parable about God's mercy and His love. Today's gospel, however, is an allegory of the Good Shepherd. A parable is a short story which illustrates a point while an allegory is an extended metaphor which paints a picture. This is what Jesus does here. HE is the Good Shepherd. The emphasis is on relationship. The sheep are MY sheep; they recognize my voice; there is mutual knowledge: I know my sheep and they know me. This mutual knowledge He even compares even to it to the knowledge of shared between the Father and the Son.

The contrast is with the hireling, who works for pay,

has no concern for the sheep; he flees at the approach of the wolf. David, Jesus' prototype, did not flee; he put his life on the line by rescuing from lion and bear. But he did not die in the process. In contrast, Jesus DID lay His life down for His sheep. And this brings us to the Paschal mystery: Jesus has died for us, and to the Easter mystery: He lays down His life, He takes it up again; and so we celebrate the resurrection.

Jesus is still the Good Shepherd in His resurrected life. As our risen Lord, He lead us to new pastures, to heavenly pastures. Many NT passages are relevant. The Book of Revelation has the interesting image of the Lamb as Shepherd: "For the Lamb ... will shepherd them and lead them to life-giving water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Rev 7:17). St. Peter says those who had strayed "have now returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls" and "when the chief shepherd is revealed, you will receive the unfading crown of glory" (1 Pet 2:25; 5:4).

But my favorite text comes from an ancient homily for Holy Saturday. It begins, "Today there is a great silence over the earth, ... a great silence because the King sleeps ... God has died in the flesh, and the underworld has trembled." But shepherd-like this King goes to the realm of darkness and death to seek our first parents like lost sheep; He goes to wake Adam and Eve from the sleep of death. He says, "Come forth, those in darkness; have light, and those who sleep: Rise." He shows them the wounds of His passion; He has died that He might return them to life.

He says, " I now speak and command ... those in prison: 'Come forth, and those in darkness: have light, and those who sleep: Rise.... Arise let us go forth from this place.' The enemy brought you out of the land of paradise; I will reinstate you, no longer in the paradise of Eden, but on the throne of heaven. ... Rise, let us go forth hence, from this place of darkness into the light of heaven."

What can we do to respond to such great love? Jesus speaks of "other sheep," that He must lead so there will be one flock, one Shepherd. Just as the world could not have been evangelized without the apostles, neither can the ideal of "one fold" be accomplished without us. The mission of Christ is universal, so "One fold and one shepherd" must embrace the whole earth. In our day vast distances are no obstacle to this unity. Distance virtually disappears with the advent of TV, cell phones, the world-wide-web. Whatever happens anywhere is instantly known everywhere else. No obstacle is presented by diversity of race, color, nationality, language, or political system. Obstacles arise only because of hatred, white supremacy, anti-Semitism, sexism, xenophobia, hostility some instinctively feel at the presence of anybody, anything "different from us." Even though this broad rich land we inhabit does not belong to us, we jealously, selfishly set up walls and armed troops to drive off the widow, orphan, or impoverished alien fleeing for asylum from war, violence, and poverty. Should we not share? Why does the land not belong to us? Because God tell us so: "the land is mine and you are but resident aliens and under my authority" (Lev 25:23). The land that belongs

to God should also be His sheepfold.

Can we, should we strive to bridge the gaps, to make one fold for all? A priority for every Christian should be to complete this work of Christ; to do this we must imitate Him, to reflect His life in our own. That means we should also be shepherds with respect to one another. How do we go about doing that? Certainly not by lording it over each other, but only by truly caring for all those with whom we come in contact, as Jesus does for his sheep. Jesus' one command is "love one another as I have loved you." Love is contagious, self-multiplying, like the leaven of the parable. Any time we exclude another from our love we also exclude Christ. When God asked Cain, "Where is Abel, your brother?" Cain answered: "I don't know; am I my brother's keeper?" This cheeky response is from the mouth of one who has just murdered his brother. We are all sisters and brothers and if we truly live in that understanding we can contribute to the Lord's desire that there be just one flock under the one great Shepherd.

The small town of Newnan, GA, gives us a lesson in this. When a neo-Nazi group planned a march there on April 21st, the townspeople would have none of it. They closed the stores, sent children with all the chalk and crayons available to draw hearts and write peace and love slogans all over the pavement where the hate-group would meet. At the event itself the protesters outnumbered the haters. It was all epitomized in a photo of a woman confronting one of the haters, the woman holding a huge sign with the words "UNCONDITIONED LOVE!!!" That is

a way to work for one fold.