

## 1 Fourth Sunday of Easter (B)

April 29, 2012

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

Today, the Fourth Sunday of Easter is designated "Good Shepherd Sunday." The Fourth Sundays of all three cycles (i.e., Cycles A, B, and C) have gospels from the 10th chapter of St. John; all of them deal with Christ as the Good Shepherd. Today's gospel speaks of the good shepherd as the one willing to lay down his life for his sheep, contrasted with the hireling, who flees at the appearance of danger because the sheep are of no personal concern to him; Jesus speaks of other sheep that He must bring into His flock and of His power to take up His life again once He has laid it down.

The shepherd is, of course, a very important theme in the Bible, whether the real life shepherd or as imagery. It appears already in the fourth chapter of Genesis: Abel, the second son of Adam and Eve, is a keeper of flocks. The Israelites considered the shepherd's life better than the farmer's (represented by Cain), because it was when they took to agriculture that they began to worship fertility deities. That is why Abel's sacrifice was acceptable rather than Cain's.

David, of course, is an important Shepherd. It was while watching over the flock that he was called in to be anointed as king by Samuel. He won renown by defeating Goliath, and in order to persuade Saul that he was capable of battling this mighty warrior, he argued that in watching over his flock he had killed both a lion and a bear in order to bring back sheep that had been carried off. He didn't lay down his life for his sheep, but he did put his life on the line. And it was he who gave us the beautiful 23rd psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd." He was not always a good shepherd. He abused his power to take Bathsheba, a married woman, and to have her husband killed.

In that regard he was like many other of Israel's "shepherds," which gives all the more point to the most powerful "good shepherd" passage in the Old Testament, Ezekiel 34, which proclaims a "Woe" against those shepherds "who have been pasturing themselves." "You have fed off their milk, worn their wool, and slaughtered the fatlings, but

the sheep you have not pastured. You did not strengthen the weak nor heal the sick nor bind up the injured. You did not bring back the strayed nor seek the lost, but you lorded it over them harshly and brutally." After proclaiming this judgment on them, He declares, "For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will look after and tend my sheep. As a shepherd tends his flock when he finds himself among his scattered sheep, so will I tend my sheep. I will rescue them from every place where they were scattered when it was cloudy and dark." This is what the Lord proclaimed in the Old Testament, it's what Jesus did in the New Testament.

But the Old Testament affords other instances: for example, Isaiah says, "Like a shepherd he [God] feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, carrying them in his bosom."

Just as God is presented as shepherd in the Old Testament, so is Jesus in the New Testament. It is not only in John 10 that Jesus is "Shepherd": He certainly describes Himself when He speaks of the man who leaves the 99 sheep in the desert to seek the one which is lost, and then carries it back on his own shoulders. In the First Epistle of Peter we read, "you have now returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls," and again, "when the chief Shepherd is revealed, you will receive the unfading crown of glory." In the judgment scene of Ezekiel just referred to, the prophet spoke of God separating the sheep from the goats, just as Jesus does in the great judgment scene in Matthew 25. The Book of Revelation has the interesting image of the Lamb as Shepherd: "For the Lamb who is in the center of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to springs of life-giving water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

The author of Hebrews speaks of God as "the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant, Jesus our Lord." Here we have the Shepherd and resurrection together, just as we do at the end of today's gospel, which makes it particularly appropriate for the Easter season. It is interesting because in John's gospel Jesus does not speak explicitly of rising or being raised from the dead. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each have three predictions of the passion, and of the nine, eight are followed with a prediction of His rising or being raised. In John's gospel Jesus speaks of

raising others from the dead and does raise them, but He doesn't speak explicitly of rising or being raised. He speaks in veiled terms when He says, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up," which His disciples understand later of His resurrection. And He speaks often of His being "lifted up," by which He refers to His death, resurrection, and ascension, seen as one event in three stages. Remember that after Peter and the Beloved Disciple visit the empty tomb and come to believe, John comments, "For they did not understand the scripture that he had to rise from the dead." In today's passage we have, "This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again." As elsewhere in John, Jesus emphasizes His perfect freedom in offering His life for His sheep.

As Christians a chief function should be for us to imitate Christ, to reflect His life in our own. That means we should also be shepherds, especially with respect to fellow Christians. How do we go about doing that? Well, VERY carefully! Certainly not by being bossy or lording it over people, ordering them around. Only those in authority are shepherds--the Abbot, the Prior (and of course the Prior and Prioress of the Oblates). Yet if we teach, we have a flock and must lead them with all care and diligence; this we do by example and by truly caring. But this is true of all those with whom we come in contact. When God asked Cain, "Where is Abel, your brother," Cain answered: "I don't know; am I my brother's keeper?" Some have wanted to make a cute response out of it: "Am I my brother's shepherd?" But the word is not "shepherd" but "keeper," one who guards and watches over. This cheeky reply from the man who has just murdered his brother leads us to think that, in fact, we are our brother's keeper, at least in the sense of being concerned about him.

Of course there are people who don't appreciate our concern. Many years ago I saw the play "The Hasty Heart" about wounded Allied soldiers of World War II in an English hospital. One was a surly Scotsman who was very distrustful ("I put nae value on the human animal"), who, if you said "How are you," would reply "Why diya ask?" He comes around when he is able to understand that the others there really did care about him. We should show that kind of love to all. It is what St Benedict commends at every turn, and it is how we will help Our

Lord bring into one fold those other sheep Jesus speaks of.

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