

May 11, 2014

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER – GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY & WORLD DAY OF PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS

This fourth Sunday of Easter, traditional Good Shepherd Sunday, has also been designated as the 51st World Day of Prayer for Vocations. Today's gospel and other scriptures show the appropriateness of it joined with this Sunday. Mixing metaphors St. Matthew records that "when he (Jesus) saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." Whether it is shepherding sheep or harvesting the crops, dedicated workers are needed for the sake of bringing in the number to be saved and keeping them safe in the body of Christ, the Church.

There is something puzzling in the gospel we just heard. The narrator records that "Although Jesus used this figure of speech (that is, about shepherds, the sheepfolds and their gatekeepers) the Pharisees did not realize what he was trying to tell them." How could the Pharisees, noted for their knowledge of their own people's law, tradition and scripture, not understand him? They knew well the frequency of shepherd imagery in the book of psalms and the writings of the prophets. We just sang in the response the well-known 23d psalm "The Lord is my Shepherd; there is nothing I shall want." Psalm 74 begins "Why, O God, have you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smolder against the sheep of your pasture? Remember your flock, which you built of old, the tribe you redeemed as your inheritance." In psalm 80, the psalmist pleads to the Lord: "O shepherd of Israel, hearken, O guide of the flock of Joseph! From your throne upon the cherubim, shine forth...." There are so many more examples when you look for them.

The prophet Isaiah in the Book of Consolation urges a herald to cry out to cities of Judah: "Here is your God! Here comes with power the Lord God, who rules by his strong arm.... 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." Perhaps Jesus talk about the thieves and marauders who came before him reminded his hearers too closely of the prophet Ezekiel's severe censure of the leaders of the Jews at the time of the Babylonian exile. He was told: "Prophecy against the shepherds of Israel.... Thus says the Lord God. Woe to the shepherds of Israel 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 those harsh words and more about their gross failures, the prophet continues: Therefore, shepherds, hear the word of the Lord.... I swear I am coming against these shepherds. I will claim my sheep from them... I will save my sheep, that they may no longer be food for their mouths.... I myself will look after and tend my sheep.”

With these scriptures and so many others that speak of the chosen people as sheep and the kings and elders of Israel as shepherds, I think Jesus’ hearers realized what he was claiming and found it too hard to accept. For the gospel continues with Jesus saying, “I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.... I know my sheep and my sheep know me in the same way that the Father knows me and I know the Father.... The Father loves me for this: I lay down my life to take it up again.” These words caused a division among his hearers. Some thought him possessed, others that he was out of his mind and not worth listening to any more.

What about us? Hopefully we do understand what Jesus is trying to tell us. We heard at the end of the first reading from St. Peter’s letter: “... you had gone astray like sheep, but you have now returned to the shepherd and **guardian** of your souls. Shepherding connotes actions like guarding, mentoring, guiding, providing for and protecting those in one’s care. We can see that richness in the metaphors of psalm 23, where the **shepherd** provides water and green pasture for his flock, is a **guide** who knows and leads them safely even through dark valleys. Then is a **host** who prepares a meal for his guests and offers them **hospitality** for the rest of their lives.

The Son of God incarnate, Jesus of Nazareth, fulfilled all of these roles in his earthly life and continues to do so now seated in glory. He also invites each of us to follow his example of self-emptying in order to rise to that new full life he promised to give. That is our task and goal within the particular vocation we are living, whether it be as married couples, single lay persons, priests or those in consecrated life. Pope Francis wrote that “every vocation...requires an exodus from oneself in order to center one’s life on Christ and on his Gospel.” He reminds us that “this ‘high standard of ordinary Christian living’ means sometimes going against the time and also encountering obstacles, outside ourselves and within ourselves.” Those are not sufficient reasons for holding back and discouragement. We should trust that God will generously bestow the grace we all need to persevere in being witnesses to the Good News of the gospel, that Jesus is both Lord and Savior of all who acknowledge him.

More than once in the good shepherd passages Jesus speaks of calling his sheep by name, and of their recognizing his voice and following him. They leave the sheltered safety of the sheepfold to follow him out into a world of hazards and dangers, trusting in his power to find those who go stray, heal the wounded, and drive off the predators.

In another place Jesus reminds us, “You did not choose me. I chose you to go forth and bear much fruit.” The seed has to die and split open in order to germinate, sprout, grow to maturity and bear its harvest. By prayer, praise, thanksgiving, and listening to the gentle still voice of the Spirit anyone who is game for the adventure can respond to Jesus calling out their name with, “Speak, Lord; your servant is listening,” and “here I am, Lord. I come to do your will.”

Jesus said that if he was lifted up he would draw all to himself. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, who has been lifted up on the cross and in his ascension. He it is who inspires and perfects your faith. Who can resist the attraction of such sacrificial love as he demonstrates by hanging there on the cross so that our sins can be forgiven and we can live in peace with God and one another? Praise God, vocations to priestly and consecrated life are growing again, and that in spite of the scandals of sexual and other abuses by pastors, teachers, and members of the flock. We still need to pray for healing and recovery for their victims, for forgiveness and for future protection to prevent it happening again.

I conclude with words from St. Benedict’s Prologue. “What, dear brothers and sisters, is more delightful than this voice of the Lord calling to us? See how the Lord in his love shows us the way of life. Clothed then with faith and the performance of good works, let us set out on this way, with the Gospel for our guide, that we may deserve to see him who has called us into his kingdom.” To him with Father and Holy Spirit be praise, honor and worship beginning now and lasting forever, AMEN.

