

## **FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**

*Gospel: John 10:27-30*

And Jesus said: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."

### **REFLECTION 1: RESPONDING TO HIS VOICE**

The Gospel today (John 10: 27-30) says that the sheep know the shepherd's voice. But can sheep be fooled by someone imitating the real shepherd? The real voice of our Shepherd Jesus Christ cannot be duplicated. It is a voice we recognise because it speaks not only to our ears but to our hearts as well.

In the catacombs of Rome, we find graphic images of the Good Shepherd. Often they show the figure of a young Christ who carries a lamb across his shoulders. The frescos convey the intimacy between the shepherd and his sheep, between Christ and his beloved. No longer is the image that of a Roman warrior but of Christ who carries his sheep warmly and lovingly. Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd, who 'lays down his life for his sheep,' yet he knew, as shepherds must, that he must nevertheless die. He knew where 'the right paths led' not only along the tracks where the flock could walk easily and safely, but also to the 'valley and shadow of death.' It was the path Jesus himself walked, knowing well where it would lead. 'Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' (Luke 24:26) and he asks us to follow him.

Jesus the Good Shepherd presents us with an image of compassion, love and care, a person in whom we can trust and have confidence. We have the choice to listen to his voice as found in the living words of the Scriptures and Church tradition or to go our own way. When we place our trust in his love and accept the Gospel, we are promised both the gift of eternal life and protection from the forces of evil. We can rest secure on the shoulders of the shepherd who will carry us to safety.

A wonderful image of heaven is presented to us in the Book of Revelations (Rev.7:9, 14-15). In the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city, the Lamb of God is enthroned and lights up the city. A majestic choir sings in front of the Lamb, the great communion of saints who have been proved worthy by following his way. The Lamb leads them to springs of living water and eternal life.

What about us? We are invited to listen to the voice of the Shepherd, Jesus Christ through a living relationship of listening to his word and prayer. Sadly our age makes it difficult to listen; we are easily distracted and eager to get on with the next task. We need to listen and to pray. Nothing is greater than the Father's love for us - we are moved to renew our trust in this tremendous revelation. The image of Jesus carrying us on his shoulders is both our comfort and our strength.

We journey towards heaven as pilgrims with no abiding city on earth, confident that our homeland is in heaven. The scene of the New Jerusalem reminds us that Jesus the living water nourishes us. He nourishes and feeds us by his word and the Eucharist. 'Indeed how good is the Lord, eternal his merciful love. He is faithful from age to age'.

## REFLECTION 2:

## THE SHEEP THAT BELONG TO JESUS

To fully understand today's short Gospel (Jn. 10:27-30) it's important to know how sheep were raised in olden times in the Middle East. They were raised mainly for the wool they produced and had therefore the prospect of a longer life-span than sheep in Europe. The shepherd got to know his sheep roaming on the open terrain. So intimate was the relationship of shepherd and flock that they would recognise the voice of the shepherd calling them by name. Those who keep pet sheep know all about this. When Jesus claimed a similar relationship with those who believed in him, his listeners had experience of what he meant.

Our Gospel today is a short extract from a much longer discourse of Jesus given at the Feast of Dedication. The scribes and Pharisees had been pressing Jesus with the question, 'How long are you going to keep us in suspense? If you really are the messiah, tell us so in plain words' (10: 14). Historically the Jews, led by Judas Maccabees, had routed Antiochus IV who had profaned the temple by erecting an idol (Baal). Those who were questioning Jesus longed to be free from the occupation of the imperial Roman Empire. But Jesus had a different idea of leadership and refrained from fuelling the nationalistic and political aspirations of his opponents. Instead Jesus was offering the witness of his signs, his works (miracles) to those who were questioning him and he yearned to return to the well rooted biblical understanding of the role of the shepherd – as a protector, leader, compassionate provider and king, envisioned in the Psalms (23) and Ezekiel (34).

If Jesus' listeners did not follow him it was not because he was not shepherd but rather that there were not sheep! To be sheep, to belong to Jesus, was to be an heir to eternal life, one must be 'of God' and of truth. The spiritual attainment necessary for recognising Jesus as shepherd and as messiah was cultivated only in the faith relationship to which Jesus invited his followers. That his hearers understood the implications of his statement was obvious from the verses following today's Gospel: 'They reached for rocks to stone him' (v. 31). Jesus proposed to his hearers a new revolution – to leave aside their political aspirations of temporal salvation and to accept instead a gentle shepherd who would lead them in truth to eternal life.

In a sense we could say that the essence of the Christian life is to become attuned to Jesus' voice, gently drawing us towards becoming loving persons. We are aware that today there's the Evil One also tugging at our heart strings with a view to making us selfish, self-centred and less loving. Today's Gospel reading urges us to distinguish between these two discorded voices – the more we choose to listen to the voice of our Shepherd, the gift of eternal life will never be stolen from us.