

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Gospel: John 10:1-10

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

Again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it.

REFLECTION 1: SHEPHERD PAR EXCELLENCE

The story is told about an American bishop of German ancestry and his strong accent. His fellow bishops jokingly referred to him as 'The Great German Shepherd'. Jesus is the Great Shepherd and in today's Gospel (John 10: 1-10) he tells us that he is also the Good Shepherd. He walks ahead of his flock and the flock recognises him because they identify his voice. Bishops today are the loving shepherds of the great flock of the faithful. They are the leaders of our local churches. The crosiers they carry are shaped like a shepherd's crook. Should we go astray, the shepherd can use it to hook our necks and pull us back into the flock.

But Jesus also said, 'I am the gate, whoever enters through me will be saved'. Jesus is telling us that we cannot enter the kingdom by climbing over the fence or tunneling under the wall. We must enter through the gate. The gate of the sheepfold has two purposes: the first was for protecting the flock from robbers and predators and the second was to provide a way in and out, providing warmth on cold nights and by day, access to food and water. Jesus identifies himself with the gate, providing both protection and nourishment to the flock. 'I have come,' said Jesus, 'that they may have life and have it to the full'.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is represented as both the gate through which the sheep gain entrance to the sheepfold and as the shepherd who knows and is known by the sheep. In Palestine sheep were reared mainly for their wool and so lived longer than their European counterpart. They were led out to pasture by the shepherd who knew each sheep individually. And they in turn would recognise his voice. Jesus our Good Shepherd knows all about us and beckons us to follow him - helping us to live like him.

Some of the earliest imagery of Jesus from Roman times, even in times of persecution, was that of the shepherd carrying a sheep. Jesus' claim to the title of Good Shepherd can be appreciated against the backdrop of Israel's failed shepherd kings. 'For the shepherds are stupid' said Jeremiah, 'and their flock is scattered. Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture, says the Lord (Jer 23:1).

Having established the sad plight of a people without a worthy leader, the Lord went on to promise, 'I myself will look after and tend my sheep' (Ezek 31:11). This promise took on flesh and blood in the person of Jesus. Who knows each person intimately, who calls us by name, who heals and protects us and seeks us out when we have strayed or become lost. It is in Jesus and through baptism into his dying and rising that believers find the way to God.

Today is Vocation Sunday. The word 'vocation' comes from the Latin, 'voco', I call. Jesus the Good Shepherd calls men and women to serve him more intimately in prayer, liturgy and ministry. Today we ask all of you to look out for and foster that calling you may observe, ever so softly whispered, towards the priesthood or religious life. Jesus the Good Shepherd needs co-shepherds and co-shepherdesses to pasture the faithful flock and guide them through that gateway that leads to eternal life.

REFLECTION 2: LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP

Perhaps you have seen movies where people gain security access by placing an open hand on a sensor, or by having a scan of their eye print. As with face recognition, security technology software can now give us the ability to recognise individual voices. It's amazing how our brains can sort through the subtleties of voices to make an identification.

In to-day's Gospel (John 10: 1-10) Jesus uses the example of a shepherd who calls his own flock out from the mixed flocks in a sheepfold. His sheep 'follow him because they know this voice'. We hear many voices calling us in our lives and the voice of the Gospel urges us to learn to recognise the voice of our Shepherd, Jesus, as he calls us to follow him and 'to have life and to have it more abundantly'.

Jesus aspired to lead us as a shepherd leads his flock. Unlike a monarch who may not know his subjects except in terms of statistics and expected revenue.... unlike a military ruler whose armies consist of faceless throngs who are valued for their strategies.... unlike the religious rulers of his day, who had little interest in the welfare of the general population, Jesus led like a shepherd. He had a personal relationship with every sheep; they knew his voice and followed only his commands. He knew their names and called each of them to follow where he would lead – Jesus found the imagery to explain the extent of his love and caring. He had come not like a hired hand who values his own safety – not like a thief or a vandal who would use the sheep for financial gain. Jesus came like a shepherd whose loving efforts for the sheep are celebrated today in the Responsorial Psalm – 'The Lord is my Shepherd, there is nothing I shall want'. In his presence, sinners find repose and refreshment, safety and sustenance and, most of all, a personal relationship where each is known intimately to the other. His love and caring were so authentic that he was willing to suffer for them – even to the point of dying on the cross so that the straying sheep might be saved. He also rose to life and graced his followers with his aptitude for leadership (Second Reading).

In ancient times, sheepfolds were enclosures. Their borders were constructed of stones and brambles or a combination of the two. Each evening after a long day of tending to the needs of the sheep, the shepherd would call out their names and going before them, would lead them to the sheepfold where they would be protected during the night. Then when all were present and accounted for, the shepherd would lie down in the entrance of the fold. He was 'the gate of the sheepfold' and if anyone tried to gain entrance, they would need the shepherd's clearance, so that the sheep i.e. his disciples, may enter the sheepfold of eternal life. To affirm that belief, Jesus would proclaim 'I am the good Shepherd....I am the gate'. Jesus is one with the same God who revealed to Moses at the burning bush, that his name is 'I am'. Those entrusted with the care of his sheep are to keep his example ever in mind.