

The Good Shepherd and Life in Abundance

Fourth Sunday of Easter – May 3, 2020

.....

World Day of Prayer for Vocations

Acts 2:14, 36-41; 1 Pet 2:20-25; Jn 10:1-10

Jesus says: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10)

Prologue: The image of shepherd and sheep is widely used in the Bible, appearing some 100 and 400 times, respectively. However, as a religious symbol, it has its limitations—especially in cities—since many are neither familiar with the lives of shepherds nor the characteristics of sheep. Nonetheless, since it is the central symbol in the gospel passage, we can draw a few lessons from this image.

Three Signposts from Scripture:

1. Though it's possible that the symbols of shepherd and sheep are not evocative in certain setups, these images spoke effectively to the Israelites, who were a pastoral people. Indeed, for Jesus and the people of his time, shepherd and sheep represented a rich cultural tradition. In the First Testament, Abraham, Isaac, Moses, David and Amos were shepherds, and there's mention also of shepherdesses like Rachel (Gen 29:9) and Jethro's daughters (Ex 2:16-17). Hence, leaders were considered as shepherds—entrusted with flocks to provide for and protect. Thus, on the one hand, Jesus calls himself a "good shepherd" (v.11) for he is caring and concerned about the sheep who go astray, while, on the other hand, he cautions people about wolves in sheep's clothing, so to say, namely, the "thieves and bandits" (vv.1,8). These are namesake leaders who only seek their own interests, totally unconcerned about their flock (see Ezek 34). Since this passage comes soon after the narrative of the man born blind (Jn 9), Jesus is referring to the Pharisees here since they are spiritually blind and refuse to accept the miracle as a sign of God's power. It's not difficult to understand Jesus as a Good Shepherd since this has been handed over to us as part of Catholic Tradition. But the reading specifically focuses on the 'gate'. Why?
2. In Jesus' time, sheep were protected in two kinds of pens: (a) a common village pen, and (b) a field enclosure that could, sometimes, be even a cave. First, when Jesus says, "The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep" (v.2) he refers to the village pen, which was guarded by a gatekeeper. The gatekeeper would identify the shepherds at dawn; then, the shepherds would take their respective flocks to pasture. Second, when Jesus says, "I am the gate for the sheep" (v.9), he alludes to the field enclosure or cave where the sheep were protected during the night. Oftentimes, the shepherd slept at the mouth of the cave, and he became literally a 'gate': blocking wild beasts from entering the pen, and preventing lambs from straying out. By so doing, he became a shield and a protector—ensuring only smooth and safe going out and coming in. This, of course, would never be done by thieves, bandits or strangers without love and concern for the flock. The punchline of the passage is: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (v.10).
3. The first reading is a continuation of Peter's post-Pentecostal preaching to the multitude. Peter is the First Shepherd to whom Jesus gave the mission: "feed my lambs" and "feed my sheep" (Jn 21:15-17). Here, Peter is a transformed man who fearlessly tells "all the house of Israel" that "God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." Mindful of their guilt in shedding Jesus' blood and eager to repent, his hearers

ask Peter what they should do. Peter replies: “Repent, and be baptised” He reiterates the promise of the Holy Spirit which is “God’s gift”. His plea led to the baptism of some three thousand people on that day. In the second reading from his First Letter, Peter uses the imagery of shepherd and sheep, saying: “You had gone astray like sheep but now you have come back to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.” He proposes Christ as the model of a life of suffering and pain; for “by his wounds you have been healed” (v.24).

Linking the Psalm (23) to the Theme of Shepherd: “The Lord is my shepherd” is a popular psalm recited and sung in many versions. It shows the love and care of the shepherd for the sheep, which makes the sheep feel safe and sound. The last verses use table imagery: “You have prepared a banquet for me . . . my cup is overflowing.” A sense of supreme solace and satisfaction is present.

Three Current Concerns that Call for *Pro-active Response*: Three responsibilities of the shepherd can be highlighted, which can be applied to all those in positions of leadership and power.

To Provide: (from Latin *pro + videre* or ‘*fore-see*’) Jesus, the Good Shepherd provides green pasture and leads his flock near restful waters so that sheep are nourished and stay healthy.

To Protect: (from Latin *pro + tegere* or ‘*fore-shielded*’) By being the ‘gate’ Jesus protects his flock in two ways: (a) by protecting and shielding them from danger; (b) by ensuring that those who move in and out through him stay safe, secure and serene.

To Promote: (from Latin *pro + movere* or ‘*move forward*’) Jesus came that you and I “might have life, and have it abundantly” (10:10); thus providing not only for our temporal needs but also for our religious, spiritual, moral needs—ultimately promising us eternal life.

Being ‘**World Day of Prayer for Vocations**’ under our responsibility ‘to promote’, we can think of ‘Vocation Promotion’ at three levels: (i) As ‘*divine call*’ of the Good Shepherd to catch fish and feed lambs. Pope Francis said [on this day in 2019]: “The Lord’s call is not an intrusion of God in our freedom; it is not a ‘cage’ or a burden to be borne. On the contrary, it is the loving initiative whereby God encounters us and invites us to be part of a great undertaking.” (ii) As ‘*human response-ability*’ of those called and chosen—especially bishops, priests, nuns, consecrated people, leaders, etc.—to give witness to Him who calls, chooses and commissions. “It is not by proselytising that the Church grows, but *by attraction*” [*Evangelii Gaudium*, n.14]. Do people feel attracted to Christ and His Good News not by my/your words, but by my/your *witness* of life?

Appropriate anecdote: A story is told of a shepherd whose sheep constantly strayed from the pen. He would go out into the wilderness, find the lost sheep, and carry it on his shoulders back to the fold. His friends laughed at him since the pen had a hole, and told him to fix it. He refused, saying, “It’s the nature of sheep to go astray and it’s the duty of a shepherd to go after straying sheep.” He added, “I love my sheep and will allow them to go in and out freely!” Does that not sound like Jesus who promises, “Anyone who enters through me will be safe: s/he will go freely in and out”?

In Lighter Vein: Parishioners of a pastor who constantly pleaded for donations during homilies refused to be called the ‘flock’ but wanted to be called ‘the fleeced’ . . . And, in Germany—not always happy to compulsorily pay taxes for the upkeep of their pastors and priests—some Germans tongue-in-cheek call their pastors ‘German shepherds’.
