

4TH SUNDAY OF EASTER, YEAR A, 2020

GOSPEL (John 10:1-10)

Jesus said:

'I tell you most solemnly, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold through the gate, but gets in some other way is a thief and a brigand. The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the flock; the gatekeeper lets him in, the sheep hear his voice, one by one he calls his own sheep and leads them out. When he has brought out his flock, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow because they know his voice. They never follow a stranger but run away from him: they do not recognise the voice of strangers.'

Jesus told them this parable but they failed to understand what he meant by telling it to them.

So Jesus spoke to them again:

'I tell you most solemnly,

I am the gate of the sheepfold.

All others who have come

are thieves and brigands;

but the sheep took no notice of them.

I am the gate.

Anyone who enters through me will be safe:

he will go freely in and out

and be sure of finding pasture.

The thief comes

only to steal and kill and destroy.

I have come

so that they may have life and have it to the full.'

HOMILY

This Sunday is often referred to as Good Shepherd Sunday. No matter which liturgical year it is, we have a Gospel from St John on the 'Good Shepherd'.

The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd has always made a deep impact on the Christian imagination, including on its iconography. The earliest Christian iconography we have is of the Good Shepherd, not the cross. But the reason it made such an impact was not because of some romantic, pastoral vision of Jesus wandering the countryside with cute animals. A shepherd in Palestine in Jesus' day did not live a romantic existence. It was a tough and lonely job. He had to live out in the wilds with his sheep and literally protect them from thieves and brigands who would come to kill and destroy. Besides, for anyone who knows what sheep are actually like, they are not cute! They are stubborn, stupid and smelly animals. It was not pleasant to live and smell like the sheep. Yet, by all accounts, a good shepherd's voice would be known to his sheep and they would follow him upon hearing his unique calls. Shepherds led from the front in Jesus' day, not from behind as in our culture.

The reason, rather, that this image made such a deep impact on the early Christians is because it was an image of Jesus being the fulfilment of the prophecies of old. It was a common theme in the Israelite culture that a Shepherd-King of the line of David would be the one to lead the people to final glory and victory. As we hear in psalm 78:

“He chose David his servant, and took him from the sheepfolds; from tending the ewes that had young he brought him to be the shepherd of Jacob his people, of Israel his inheritance. With upright heart he tended them, and guided them with skillful hand.”

In similar and continuous vein, we read in Ezekiel (34:22):

“I will save my flock, they shall no longer be a prey; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.”

Thus, Jesus’ metaphor of being the Good Shepherd would have been understood as a claim to be the Shepherd-King predestined from of old. The only difference, of course, is that Jesus develops the image further. He speaks (later) of the shepherd giving up his life for the sheep and the love of the shepherd being akin to the love of the Father for the Son. There is much to theologially ‘graze on’ here - and the Fathers of the Church did just that (eg., Peter Chrysologus, Sermon 40).

But what probably matters most to us, by way of pastoral extension, are the Lord’s admonitions to his disciples regarding following the Good Shepherd. They are as equally valid now as they were then: we need to listen to his voice, which brings life and life to the full, and ignore the voice of strangers who seek to kill and destroy.

What does that mean, practically? The early Church knew exactly what it meant on a two-fold level. The first level was a deeply personal and moral one. It meant that one had to reject sin. It is sin and the evil one who seeks to kill and destroy. The empty allure of evil, often through our disordered passions, does not bring excitement and joy; it brings enslavement and death – always spiritually, and sometimes physically. That’s why in the Acts of the Apostles, in our first reading, when Peter is asked by the people what they are to do in following Jesus, he immediately says, ‘you must repent. ... and everyone of you must be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins...’ (Acts 2:38).

It is not a popular message to preach, particularly in our day, but the first apostles always began their preaching by the call to repentance. They did so because that’s what Jesus did too! (cf. Mk 1:15). Any authentic proclamation of the Gospel will, therefore, always have the clear denunciation of sin, and any genuine follower of the Good Shepherd will necessarily seek to eliminate sin from their lives. Because to do so is to listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd; to remain in one’s sin is to follow the voice of strangers.

But there was another level in which the early Church clearly understood the Lord’s meaning, and that was on a more collective, doctrinal level of the content of the faith. In other words, that which is authentic Christian teaching, and that which is not; that which is orthodox, and that which is heterodox. This is why the early Church had such long and protracted battles against heresy (cf. St Athanasius and his feast day yesterday). It is why the Church is always on her guard against heresy and heterodox teachings. Because unsound teaching is to the body of the Church that which sin is to the individual soul: it kills and destroys. We should never, therefore, follow the voice of strangers to the Magisterium of the Church, for she teaches with the voice and authority of the Good Shepherd. Those who undermine her solemn teachings are like thieves and brigands!

This Sunday, let us with joy follow the voice of the Good Shepherd both in our faith and in our personal lives, for it is he alone who gives life and life to the full; and we will find it by remaining faithful members of his flock.