

The Good Shepherd



One of the best-known sayings of Jesus is: "I am the Good Shepherd; I know my sheep and they know me". It occurs in the Gospel for today. Most churches that I have visited have a picture or a stained-glass window showing Jesus holding a sheep in his arms. I well remember being in an Episcopal Church in the diocese of the Virgin Islands where on the left side of the Altar there was a life-sized picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. It was made increasingly impressive because Jesus was pictured as black. An excellent picture that I will remember for the rest of my life.

Shepherds were very important in the life of Israel in Jesus's Day. King David saw himself as the Shepherd of the People, and the prophets said that if the kings did not do their job of shepherding their people, then God would displace them, and become the true shepherd of Israel. Jesus Himself talks about the false or hired shepherds who did a good job until danger appeared—and then they would run away to save themselves. He was of course, talking about the Rabbis and Pharisees who did not really care for their people when danger threatened. It is ever so.

"I am the Good Shepherd," said Jesus, with an emphasis on the word "Good", in opposition to those who were not diligent in caring for the people. "I know my sheep, and they know me," he said. Like a good shepherd of his day, he would know each sheep, would have names for each of them, and spent so much time with them that they knew his voice and actions intimately. A shepherd of the day could call his sheep, and they would all turn and follow him, attracted by the sound of his voice. He was the one who led them out of the sheep fold each morning and led them personally to areas of grass to eat, moving them from one area to another so they could eat well. Now that is different from today—that is, the shepherd of Jesus' day led his sheep who followed him. Today, a shepherd would drive the sheep ahead of him using a sheep dog to do the driving. There is a significant difference between a shepherd of Jesus's day and a shepherd of today. Please don't miss the difference.

Shepherds were numerous in Israel at the time of Jesus, but they were not well regarded by religious authorities. They did not have time to attend synagogues regularly, nor did they keep the Jewish religious Law. But let's face it; they were out on the fields with their sheep, day and night. Shepherds would smell just as did their sheep. They were with them day and night. In fact, once they were bedded down in the sheepfold, the shepherd would lie down at the entrance, blocking the entrance to the sheepfold with his body as a door. Thus, we have the saying of Jesus: "I am the door." I imagine that when the Shepherds arrived at Bethlehem to see Jesus in the Stable, they smelled exactly like their sheep. No insult, just reality. Sheep are dirty because they are out on the fields all day;

they have no sense of direction and will wander off, unless looked after; they will bite if they are not fed; they need 24-hour care.

Using these ideas, we can see what Jesus meant:

- He feeds His sheep—and He feeds us with the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar, with His own Body and Blood.
- He protects His sheep—when we walk with Jesus, He protects us from evil with the power of the Holy Spirit.
- He guides His sheep—He guides us to the Father when we walk with Him. Jesus brings us into Unity with Him and with other Christians if we would only lose our stupid feelings of superiority over other Christians. (I'm right, and you're wrong.)

Finally, Jesus says: "I give my Life for the Sheep." Now we come to the root of the matter. It is one thing to guide, to feed and to protect the sheep—even the Hired Shepherd can do that—but Jesus died for us on the Cross, to take upon Himself that punishment for our sins. He gave His life for us, to bring forgiveness, and to restore us to a Relationship with the Father. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep—and we are the sheep of which he talks. And all this would be nice, if that is all that happened. But there is more.

Jesus not only gave His life on the Cross for us, to redeem us—He also ROSE AGAIN to prove that what He had done was effective for us all. The Resurrection PROVES that we are forgiven, we are redeemed, we now have a chance to grow into the saints that the Father wants us to be. The door is open—and we can trust it to stay open because Jesus is the Door.

So, revel in the knowledge that Jesus is our Good Shepherd. He cares for us, He feeds us, He leads us (if we will but follow) and brings us into eternal life. Quite a job for a Shepherd. Quite a job for a Saviour. Alleluia Jesus.

As you come today to offer the Holy Sacrifice of Christ, as you come to the Altar to receive the Blessed Sacrament, thank the Father for sending Jesus as your Good Shepherd, kneel before Him in adoration and thanksgiving, and pledge to walk humbly amongst your fellow Christians all this week.

Let us pray:

Hear us, Shepherd of your people,
You who commanded us to love our neighbours with our whole hearts,
forgive us our sins and make us whole in body and soul,
through Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord. Amen

[It is interesting to know that after I preached this sermon I was physically threatened (twice) for insulting shepherds. Shepherding in Jesus' day (on which this sermon is based) was quite different from shepherding today. Still, I rejoice that Jesus is our Good Shepherd, no matter how often I am threatened. Fr. Ron]