

Good Shepherd
4th Sunday of Easter (A)
(Jn 10:1-10)

In John chapter 10, Jesus takes up the well-known Biblical image of the shepherd (cf. Ps 23) to speak of himself: *“I am the Good Shepherd. The sheep hear my voice, and I call my own sheep by name and lead them out. I go before them, and the sheep follow me, for they know my voice. I am the sheepgate: if anyone enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. I came that they might have life and have it abundantly.”*

In biblical times there were no great ranches or big agricultural corporations like today. Nor were there barbed wire or chain link fences. Herds were small, and supervised by individual shepherds. Groups of shepherds would roam the countryside with their flocks moving from pasture to pasture.

At night, sheep from various flocks would be corralled together into a single pen, surrounded by a low rock wall. One shepherd would be appointed to keep watch at the gate, guarding the sheep from thieves or predators who might try jump over the wall. Often times the shepherd would be the gate, if there wasn't a door.

Sheep were separated into their flocks through the voice of the shepherd. From the time they're born, the sheep learn the voice of their shepherd, and get named just like we name our pets. When the shepherd comes for his flock in the morning, he gives his call and the sheep recognize his voice. The sheep will only respond to the voice of their own shepherd. One by one they pass through the gate and are counted, the shepherd literally calling each one by name.

The sheep would not follow a stranger whose voice they do not recognize. In fact, it would make them nervous. And anything that tries to get at the sheep by coming over the fence instead of through the gate is automatically a predator.

The Scriptures teach us that a shepherd is someone who knows his sheep, and who is recognized by his sheep. Between the shepherd and sheep there exists a deep and natural bond of trust, which keeps them together. There is no need of fences, because where there is trust there is no fear of the flock scattering.

This trust between shepherd and sheep is built on mutual knowledge, and love. Every once in a while a young sheep might stray from the flock looking for greener pastures. The good shepherd does not abandon a lost sheep. With the others gathered together he will go off and search for the stray, in order to bring it back (Lk 15:3-9). This sense that they will be sought out and guided together builds trust.

Likewise, the good shepherd will protect his sheep from danger. The shepherd's staff is not just to corral and discipline the sheep. The staff is also to ward off attackers: wolves and thieves. The true shepherd will intervene when there is danger. Jesus says the Good Shepherd will lay down his life for his sheep.

Finally, the trust between sheep and shepherd is built by the fact that the shepherd nourishes the sheep, leading them to verdant pastures where there is good grass and refreshing streams.

The Lord is our true Shepherd, but within the flock God raises up other shepherds to lead in His name, giving His example to follow. Jesus chose the twelve apostles to be the first shepherds in the Church, and among them he singled out Peter to be the chief shepherd, telling him after the resurrection: "*Feed my lambs, Tend my sheep, feed my sheep*" (Jn 21:15-17). Jesus teaches Peter to have the same love for the flock that he had, the same readiness to lay down his life for their protection. Later, in his first letter, St. Peter will speak to the other leaders of the Church, urging them to be responsible shepherds: "*I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ... Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but eagerly, not as domineering over them but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown of glory*" (1 Pt 5:1-4).

Today the bishops continue the shepherding role of the apostles, going ahead of the flock at each Mass with the shepherd's staff. Associated with them are those priests appointed pastors of parishes, "pastor" being a synonym for "shepherd."

There is a great responsibility for the Church's shepherds to imitate Christ the Good Shepherd, and some of the harshest rebukes in the Bible are reserved for those shepherds who fail to do so: "*Woe to the shepherds who mislead and scatter the flock of my pasture, says the Lord. You have not cared for them, and I will take care to punish your evil deeds*" (Jer 23:1, Ez 34:2).

Perhaps in some ways our Church has become like the big corporations. The bishops are no longer shepherds who know the sheep and call them by name, fiercely protecting them from wolves—the spiritual and moral dangers posed to the flock of Christ in the modern world. They are corporate managers concerned about budget, lawsuits, and the status quo; more than the orthodoxy of preaching, or the dignity and integrity of the sacraments by which the flock is nourished.

But it's not just bishops. Priests in the parishes also become so caught up in administrative duties that there is little time to actually teach, visit the sick, and seek out the missing.

And of course what applies to bishops and priests in the larger Church applies equally to parents, appointed by Christ as shepherds of the small flock in the domestic Church. Parents are the first shepherds, who know each of their children by name. By their example and self-sacrifice they build those bonds of trust in the family, and provide children with security. By their wisdom and vigilance they protect their family from harm, from bad influences, and guide their children in the correct paths. Through their hard work they ensure the children are properly nourished and taken care of.

Priests and bishops can learn much from good parents, and parents can learn a lot from good priests. All who have shepherding roles, whether in the parish or in the home, are servants of the one true Shepherd, Jesus Christ. His human servants try to do the best they can with his help, and therefore stay very close to him through prayer, sacraments, and study of Scripture. Knowing that like Peter and the Apostles we are imperfect, we depend not on ourselves but on the presence of Jesus the Good Shepherd to work through us.

Let us pray for our shepherds, that bishops and priests will be true icons of Jesus the Good Shepherd. That their leadership will be clear and courageous; that when they speak it is the voice of Jesus that comes through loud and clear. Let us pray that they may not become so bogged down in peripheral tasks that they lose contact with the sheep, and don't even know who the sheep are. Let us pray that they may use their shepherd's staff to protect the sheep from wolves and false shepherds who would teach error, mislead, confuse, and scatter the flock of Christ.

But let us also pray for those other shepherds, the parents. Let us pray that they also do not become so caught up in the things of the world – that they do not have time for their children's needs. Let us pray that parents will reclaim their role as the first teachers of their children, especially in religion and morality. Parents who simply hand over the education of their children to a public school system based entirely on secular values, or parents who are not directly involved in the religious education of their children, have abandoned their responsibility as shepherds. What Jeremiah says applies to them: "Woe to these shepherds!"

Jesus is the gate (Jn 10:9), the filter. All must pass through him, and his Gospel. All that is good and pure will pass through that gate, while all that is harmful or false, or useless will be rejected. Though he works through human instruments, Jesus remains the one true Shepherd of his flock. By means of the Gospels, the tradition and teaching of the Church, and the holy Sacraments, we receive true shepherding care that brings strength, healing, and life.