

4-Easter-C

The 4th Sunday of Easter is called “Good Shepherd Sunday” because every year on this Sunday we take one of the teachings of Jesus from John chapter 10, in which Jesus reveals his identity as the Good Shepherd.

This Sunday is also often observed as a day of prayer for vocations to the priesthood and religious life, since priests and religious are visible manifestations to us of Jesus in his role as a Good Shepherd. It’s also Mother’s Day.

So I have comments on only two lines from this Gospel - and yes, I know that there are only 8 lines in this entire passage. One line that jumps out at me is:

“My sheep hear my voice”

In Jesus’ Good Shepherd discourse, he compares himself to a shepherd and his disciples to the sheep, and he talks about how thieves try to break into the flock and steal the sheep.

Jesus sees all of human history as a dramatic battle between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. Jesus is the powerful shepherd who casts his spiritual cloak of protection over his sheep. With the sacraments (like Holy Communion), he guards his flock from thieves who might try to steal his sheep.

All the sheep that Jesus shepherds belong to the Father, and Satan is not able to snatch them out of Jesus’ hand. But Jesus is clear - if they don’t stay close to him, disciples can fall away of their own free will. We all know people who have made this choice. But Jesus never stops seeking those lost ones. And he is also very clear that his disciples can be cut off from him if they don’t bear fruit. So discipleship is more than just showing up.

In our first reading, the preaching of Paul and Barnabas produces a mixed reaction. Some embrace it with joy, and others respond with hostility and violence. Even today the church constantly proclaims the gospel - the voice of the shepherd - with a message of love and salvation. Even today, Jesus’ voice is considered a threat to the status quo and social order. I’m surprised that there are no protesters here. We listen to his voice and do what he says because he is God - who came to live and walk with us. He is God - who created the universe - all that is seen and unseen.

To help us, we have almost 4000 years of the stories of people who have been trying to understand what this Good Shepherd has been trying to tell us - what this means for our daily lives, for our family and our friends. The voice of the shepherd tells us to follow him. And as far as I can tell, the Catholic Church is the only worldwide community of followers that are still doing all the things Jesus told us to do. He told us to gather like this - to listen to his voice and receive his body, blood, soul and divinity in Holy Communion.

The Church, for all generations, remains faithful to the grace and the spirit given to the Apostles and our Bishops, who continue the work of the Shepherd. Through the Church, the people of every land hear the Shepherd’s voice, and follow him. The Church is that “great multitude” John sees in his vision in today’s second reading.

Another line that jumps out at me is:

“I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish”

When Jesus says: “I give them eternal life,” he’s talking about the life of the age to come, a supernatural life that never ends. He then says: “They shall never perish.” It doesn’t mean that Jesus’ disciples aren’t going to die. It means that if we stay close to him, we won’t experience eternal death, which would be eternal separation from God - we call that hell.

If you heard Father Stephen pray the Collect at the beginning of Mass, you heard a prayer that God will lead us to share in the joys of heaven so that we, his humble flock, may reach the place that our brave Shepherd has gone before. And after communion, we will again pray that our Shepherd settles us in eternal pastures because we have been redeemed by Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross.

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So we pray that our Good Shepherd guides us. It seems a common misunderstanding that this will keep us from all suffering, but that's not really what he said. I hope it's obvious as we journeyed through Holy Week, that Jesus didn't show us a path without pain or suffering. He told us to take up our cross. And if we continue to listen to him and stay close to him, our sorrow will become joy in the life of the age to come.

When I say "the life of the age to come," some of us draw a blank. We have trouble with this "heaven" thing. How can we picture life everlasting? We hear the promise of an afterlife, but we have no clue what it might be like or if it exists at all.

Since it's Mother's Day, imagine you are an unborn baby in mom's belly. We've all been there. But imagine that you are aware of, and can talk about, everyday life. You have a wonderful life, but one day you hear a voice, saying that life outside this nice warm belly is possible, and you will love it.

You think that there could be no food or oxygen without that umbilical cord thing. Yet the voice - maybe it's mom - says there is. Believe it or not, you will receive food, but it will be through your mouth. And your mouth will let you breathe air and talk and sing and kiss and cry - and eat ice cream. And your arms and legs will do more things than you could ever imagine beyond the kicking and swimming around you do inside this nice warm belly. You can't believe this, because no one you know has ever come back to tell you about this life after the warm belly. But now you know mom was right - as usual. Happy Mother's Day. Amen?

Thanks to Brant Pitre and John Kavanaugh, SJ

-Deacon Jack Schaefer