

## Easter Sunday 4

The comparison of Jesus to a Good Shepherd requires us to accept that He is also saying that we, to some extent, bear a certain resemblance to sheep. Sheep are herd animals and when separated off from the flock, they are vulnerable to any number of dangers, especially predators. Sheep are notoriously tunnel “visioned”. They do not always perceive the threats around them. Their heads are down, and they are focused on the grass. Predators can approach without notice. Yet, flocks can also suddenly bolt for no apparent reason.

Jesus here is speaking primarily of our life as we live it in relationship to others, to our parish community, to the whole Church, and to the world around us. He is concerned with our souls and whether we will be able to persevere to find God, to attain to the Divine life, so that we may not live our lives missing the greatest good that a human can receive. For us there are many temptations and false gospels that pose a great danger: such threats impede our finding the way. Jesus did not start a philosophy, or a program of self-help, though these can be found in Him. He founded a Church, a flock, because He knows that above all else we need somewhere to belong and to be part of and we need shepherding.

Satan’s greatest hope is to prevent us from reaching God and receiving His love and life. One of his chief ways of doing this is to prevent us from becoming part of a flock. Instead, he keeps us away from it and therefore susceptible to all the allurements and false promises of happiness – to wander from one new thing to another, hoping to find fulfillment, or at least momentary pleasure, and brief respites from loneliness or despair.

Now shepherds were, and oftentimes still are, kind of like roughnecks. They were not too couth, and they were not too subtle, but they were brave, if they were good shepherds. They would do battle with wild beasts and live in the open-air for long periods of time. A shepherd knew his flock, knew which sheep belonged to his care. And, the sheep would learn to distinguish his voice, much as a dog knows his master’s voice. That is the voice that means safety and good pasture.

We too learn to hear the voice of our Good Shepherd, using the ear of our souls, that inward sense of His Presence and guidance. We learn by trial and error: What works out and what does not, what suffering He permits and what He relieves. If our conscience is not shut down, we hear him call to our conscience. All these ways we learn to follow His voice.

Shepherds risked the possibility of death from any number of directions, predators, thieves, enemies. A good shepherd would have to reckon on this as part of His job. Jesus told his little flock that He would lay down His life for them, for the sheep. He would face all the forces sin and death – all the forces of evil that want to deny us God and His kingdom. He paid the ultimate price for human sin and rebellion. But, what is truly remarkable is that Jesus also told them that He would be able to take up His life after having laid it down. This would be the sign that Jesus is more than just another man. He is also God. Because He had the power to take up His life, we can believe in Him and in His promises.

Jesus warns of hirelings who run away from the wolf. To the flock when Jesus uttered these words, Jesus would be referring to the false teachers of Israel, who were comfortable and preached an easy sort of Gospel that did not take evil seriously and did not warn and protect the flock, instead defending their own positions of influence. In a contemporary sense this would refer to shepherds who are complacent or fearful in the face of the many evils that are tearing the people apart today. Clergy can be afraid to expend their capital of good-will and reputation to face up to the grave dangers that leave God's flock defenseless in the face of the wolf, that is, the devil. Pray that I and other ordained clergy will be good shepherds for God's flock, not hirelings, brave men who are faithful and true, willing to risk it all to confront the wolf.