

**Fourth Sunday of Easter – Year B**  
**(May 3, 2009)**

**Choosing to Follow**

Let me tell you a little story I read recently that seems appropriate for this Fourth Sunday of Easter.

Students at a parish school were learning about Jesus and his role as the Good Shepherd. They were given a month to memorize Psalm 23, which they would have to recite at a school assembly with the pastor and all the parents attending. When the big night came, the first student nervously stepped up to the microphone and began, “The Lord is my shepherd.” Then his mind went as blank as a wall. The parents waited while he struggled to remember the next line. Finally, in desperation he said, “And that’s all I need to know.”

At first there was silence, and then the applause began. The claps came slowly at first, finally building to full, thunderous ovation. The child was right, that is all we need to know.

Well, that reminds me a little bit of the Beatles a few years ago singing, “All you need is love,” and that’s true, too. But a closer look might tell us that it’s a bit more complex than that. So let’s take a closer look.

The Church today and every year on this Fourth Sunday of Easter asks us to think of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The Gospel is taken from the tenth chapter of John and each year it is cut in such a way as to emphasize a different aspect of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. In the A Cycle Christ is the sheep gate. Only through him can we gain entrance to the Kingdom of God. In the B Cycle where we are this year he is the model shepherd who lays down his life for his flock, and in the C Cycle he is the caring shepherd, who knows each of his sheep intimately and who in return is intimately known by his sheep. He is also their leader and they follow him without hesitation placing all their trust and confidence in him.

Sometimes in our responsorial psalm we sing, “We are his people, the sheep of his flock.” Now I have met people who have trouble with the imagery here. They don’t like to be called sheep. One man once said to me, “Father, I think it’s insulting to call us sheep. After all, they are helpless.

They can't do anything without the shepherd." I looked at him and I said, "Yees." A woman once said to me. "But, Father, sheep are so dumb. We at least have intelligence. If the sheep don't have a shepherd, they go wandering off and all sorts of terrible things happen to them; they get hurt and they get lost." And again I said, "Yees." You see, they had actually caught the meaning of the metaphor, but had failed to see how it applied to themselves.

Sheep are totally dependent on the shepherd. He cares for them, he nurtures them, he feeds them, he leads them. And Jesus wants to let us know that he does the same for us. More than that, the good shepherd goes out to find the lost sheep, the one that has strayed and that is just as important to him as the ninety-nine others. The other thing that is significant about this is that when one sheep is missing the flock is not whole. And that's why the shepherd risks life and limb to find that one lost sheep. It's an image of salvation, how Jesus brings us all together so that there will be one flock and one shepherd.

Of course, we *are* different from sheep. We have intellect and will. We can choose to follow the Good Shepherd or not to follow. If we choose not to follow disastrous things can happen. On the other hand, "If we hear his voice and follow him, he will lead us to springs of living water and wipe away tears from our eyes."

But, you know, to follow Jesus is not for the cowardly or the self-centered. To return his love is to love as he loved: intelligently and passionately, freely and with every fiber of our being. To love as he loved is to care as he cared: not for some abstract concept called humanity. But for real people. For every sister and brother that crosses our path, not simply those we like and who like us, but for those we don't particularly like or we positively dislike, those who live and think and talk and even sin differently from us. More than anything else, to love as he loved is to care for the sheep that limp, the lost ones, those who hunger for bread or justice or love, those who have no pillow for their heads, no shoulder for their troubled hearts, those who are imprisoned behind bars or imprisoned within their tortured selves.

To be Christian we must dare to care, we must dare to let ourselves love. We must dare to open our arms wide to a whole world that is

desperate for our compassion, *our* compassion. If we do that then we will not only hear the Good Shepherd call each of us by name, but we will have become what he is: Good Shepherds for the world we live in.