

**Fourth Sunday of Easter – Year A  
(May 11, 2014)**

**The Good Shepherd**

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is always Good Shepherd Sunday. In each of the three cycles of readings the Gospel is taken from the tenth chapter of John where Jesus gives a long discourse about himself as the Good Shepherd. The Gospel is cut each year in such a way as to emphasize a different aspect of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. In the A Cycle where we are this year he is the sheep-gate. Only through him can entrance be gained to the Kingdom of God. In the B Cycle 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.

In our response to the first reading today, we sang, “The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want.” And both scripture and our Liturgy compare us to sheep. “We are his people, the sheep of his flock.” Now I’m going to tell you a secret, and of course after I tell you it won’t be a secret any more. The fact is I am not entirely comfortable identifying myself as a sheep. After all sheep are pretty dumb. That’s why they need a shepherd. The other big problem is that, while sheep were a very important part of people’s lives in Jesus’ time, most of us have very little experience of sheep in our culture except perhaps when we eat lamb in one form or another. But Jesus is obviously not talking about that.

My own most vivid encounter with sheep was on a narrow lane in Ireland when I was driving a car, a little nervous to begin with as I concentrated on staying on the left side of the road, when suddenly I came around a bend in the road and had to apply the brake very quickly to avoid a collision with a flock of sheep that were blocking the road. They were not in any hurry to get out of the way. Nor was the shepherd who was leading them.

Well, as far as I know, we are not going to encounter a flock of sheep on 36<sup>th</sup> St. or in Georgetown or anywhere else in Washington except maybe

in the zoo, so we have to imagine what Jesus is saying to us today with this very familiar imagery.

One very obvious thing is this: the 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 thing 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. Besides that, when one sheep is missing the flock is not whole. And that's why the shepherd risks his life and limb to find that one lost sheep. It's an image of salvation, bringing us all together so that there will be one flock and one shepherd.

There is of course a big difference between us and sheep. We are human beings with intelligence and free will. We can choose to follow or not to follow. And it seems to me from the perspective of many years of thinking, praying, and preaching this Gospel, the most human thing we can do, the most sensible thing we can do is to follow him; because to follow him is to return his love, that love which is Jesus' only hold over us, the only bond with which he draws us.

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 for those we like or who like us, but also for those we don't particularly like or who positively dislike us, those who seem to have no socially redeeming qualities, the wierdos, those who live and think 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 head, no shoulder for their troubled heart, those who are imprisoned behind bars, or within their own tortured selves.

We are all being called to embrace all injured souls, all wounded sheep, in the fullness of the Church and to remind one another that the path to freedom lies in the hope and love of Jesus Christ, our good shepherd, a hope and love promised to all. Christ himself assured us that

against his flock, the Church, “the gates of hell will not prevail.”

The Good Shepherd still strives mightily to keep his flock together.