

Acts 13:14, 43-52
Psalm 100:1-2, 3, 5
Revelation 7:9, 14b-17
John 10:27-30

Today is the Fourth Sunday of Easter and in recent years this Sunday has come to be known as Good Shepherd Sunday. The Gospel reading from the Book of John is relatively short compared to Holy Week and the weeks following with the main emphasis this morning focused on Jesus as Our Good Shepherd.

Borrowing terminology from the then very familiar agrarian society, - when Jesus referred to Himself as the Good Shepherd the people listening knew exactly what and to whom He was referring. They also understood that the shepherd's role, if need be, was to lay down his life for His flock of sheep.

It may be challenging for many of us now to understand the role shepherds played in ancient Middle Eastern economies; hence, when Jesus used – for Him present-day examples that now serve mainly as spiritual metaphors for us not familiar with agrarian terms and practices – we can certainly understand the difficulties in relating.

With those thoughts in mind let's return to the Gospel narrative where Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me." What did Jesus mean by this statement? Here again, without a basic understanding of how sheep follow their shepherd the postmodern man or woman is at a loss as to how to practically relate to a Good Shepherd, let alone a Redeemer King. Therefore somehow, we need to imagine being in a primitive agrarian setting where we are watching a shepherd tending his sheep.

So, I was thinking, there must be any number of modern examples of human and animal relationships that would parallel those of sheep and shepherds? Was I ever wrong, not so, the best I could come up with was how people relate to their pets? But even there, for the most part dogs and cats can fend for themselves if left out in the wild; while sheep on the other hand, would most likely not survive by themselves. More than likely they would sooner or later fall victim to the dogs and cats that were hungrily prowling about.

Sheep need human interaction and human touch in order to thrive, and in like manner so we too need a personal touch from God to prosper. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me." The Bible seems to indicate that before we can follow the Lord, we need to first hear His voice.

OK, so how do we know for sure that we are hearing God's voice?

That's a good question and it comes up a lot in faith discussions. It really is a good question. Where and how do we turn to hear from the Lord? It's a question many of us can relate too especially when we turn on the radio, watch TV, or read religious books where at times preachers and teachers contradict each other. So again, where are we to turn?

I believe the answer is tuning our ears to accommodate silence, turning our intellectual presuppositions off, and turning our hearts back on to the sacred Scriptures as interpreted through the lenses of Early Church Tradition. Thus, our first reading today describes saints Paul and Barnabas preaching to the people in Antioch in Pisidia where it is recorded that the whole city turned out to hear the two disciples speak.

Think about it, the whole city turned out to hear the word of the Lord. Would that people do the same today. Such was the influence of their teaching on both Jew and Gentile that the religious leaders had them expelled from their city.

However, the notion of Holy Spirit hearing is still yet a very difficult discipline for moderns and post/moderns to master. Again, we need silence and solitude to accomplish the task. Hence the reason people need to allow the Lord, their Good Shepherd to lead them to quiet places where they can hear the still small voice of the Holy Spirit. The leading of the Holy Spirit is always gentle and non-pushy (if you will). It really is true; silence and solitude facilitate hearing what the Spirit of God has to say.

Practice makes perfect, hence the need to study those who have excelled in truly hearing the Lord and not get caught up in modern fads and speculations.

Here we have yet another question; where do shepherds lead their flocks and why? Well, the basic answer is that shepherds lead their flocks to life giving food, hopefully in abundant green pastures where they can graze without fear of being harmed. Why, because sheep have a problem finding their own food and providing for their own protection.

Born without innate dominant warrior leadership tendencies domestic sheep tend to need someone to help them find food, water, and sheltered protection.

So again, where does a good shepherd lead His sheep? The answer is our Good Shepherd leads His sheep to the very food that when humbly eaten will provide life and that life more abundant. That eternal life-giving food is the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of

the Lord Jesus Christ, and it is available each time we participate in the Most Holy Eucharist.

Yes, you might say, but many Christian teachers will argue that here that Jesus was referring to spiritual food as being the Word of God contained within the Bible. A good point to consider, but on the other hand think about it, why did St Paul say, “Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). St Paul said study the Word of God, whereas Jesus said eat the Word of God. I think we must consider both points from all perspectives.

Jesus said, “Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you have no life in you” (John 6:53). Here C. K. Barrett explains the later point just mentioned in *The Inter Varsity Press New Testament Commentary Series* when he writes,

Our utter neediness is seen clearly when set against the greatness of his offer: Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day (v. 54). [Here] Jesus is promising a new quality of life now and resurrection in the future.¹

We cannot ignore the fact that Jesus emphatically insisted that we consume the Paschal Sacrifice, whereas St Paul was talking about studying the Scriptures. Indeed, two different subjects or Paul would have used the same terminology as Jesus.

In our second reading from the *Book of Revelation*, John the revelator describes those “who have survived the time of great distress, they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

¹ <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/ivp-nt/Jesus-Deepens-Scandal-Eat-My-Flesh-Drink>

For this reason, they stand before God's throne and worship Him day and night in His temple. The one who sits on the throne will shelter them. They will not hunger or thirst anymore, nor will the sun or any heat strike them. For the Lamb who is in the center of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to springs of life-giving water, and God will wipe every tear from their eyes (Rev.14b-17).

Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth, no man or woman comes to the Father except by me" (John 14:6). You see there may be any number of ways a person may come to Jesus; (we all seem to follow our own path to Him) but there is only way to the Father and that is by and through His only begotten Son, the once crucified but now risen Jesus Christ.

Paramount in explaining the redemption story is the eternal and holy relationship between Jesus and His Father. You see, Jesus does not lead people to Himself; He leads them to His Father who alone with Christ has the power to give eternal life to those who deserve eternal death. Hence Jesus the Good Shepherd gently leads His sheep through the pits and quagmires of life and death to the green pastures of His Heavenly Father's household.

So much like a flock of sheep, humanity is unable to find its way to the spiritual food needed to sustain eternal life; therefore, we absolutely and unequivocally need a shepherd to guide us. Indeed, we cannot make the journey home to the Father by leaning only on our own understanding. It is impossible.

Oh, we can navigate the worldly paths of life here on earth somewhat well by ourselves. We can gain an education, work hard to get ahead, and we certainly put in enough time and practice

trying to do it, but then fail to ignore the graces and sacraments needed to navigate the unknown shadows of death.

The only place one can eat the food of immortality is from a Eucharistic altar during a gathered people humbly consenting to becoming one with the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. This teaching is not just my opinion, or a particular group's doctrine, nor should it be a point of contention for anyone. It just is what it is. And why, because Jesus said so, "Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you have no life in you" (John 6:53).

Jesus said, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. No one can take them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one can take them out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one." Indeed, a mystery extraordinaire.

So then in closing let's ponder one more question. What stops, or why do people refuse to follow the Good Shepherd through the valley of the shadow of death towards the light of heaven? In other words, why do people struggle so much with accepting the Lord's gracious mercy?

Jesus gave the answer in today's Gospel reading, "My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me." That's right, we sheep must first recognize the Shepherd's voice. If we do not recognize the Good Shepherd's voice, then there is no recourse or resource for the journey and that person will remain lost in darkness.

Each person will chose to follow someone or something, and if they don't recognize the voice of Jesus then they will surely follow the voice of an imposter; a surrogate voice if you will, who will

eventually lead them away from the Father's house to his own house of destruction and pain.

But maybe the more important question is, how will they know if we do not instruct them. Today is Mother's Day and we want to honor all our mothers here present and in heaven. Of all people mothers have the most unique opportunities to influence their children for the Lord. When mothers do not share the love of God with their children the children often struggle with their relationship with the Lord.

Now that is not to put all the responsibility on our moms, because if dads do not demonstrate or model the love of God, it makes it even more difficult for sons and daughters to live for Christ. And that is not to say that our children do not have a choice in the matter too, because they do. Sometimes they can be a little resistant in submitting to His guidance.

The words of Moses come to mind when he told the children of Israel in the Book of Deuteronomy chapter 30, "I call heaven and earth today to witness against you: I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life then that you and your descendants may live" (Duet. 30:19).

Jesus said, "I am the way the truth and the life." As we come to share in the Sacred Mysteries of Holy Communion let us be willing to trust Him at His word, and then go forth to demonstrate our good fortunes to those who still hunger and thirst for righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

May God bless our moms and give them peace both here on earth and now in Heaven. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.