

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

This Sunday which is associated so strongly with the shepherd image is sometimes referred to as *Good Shepherd Sunday*. Although shepherds in the first century produced both positive and negative reactions, here Jesus specifically says that he is the *good* shepherd. How do we know that he is good? He is good because he lays down his life for his sheep, he cares for his own flock (that is, out of deep devotion, not merely a financial arrangement), and *he knows* those who belong to his grouping --- the ones for whom he is specifically expected to provide safety and sustenance. This kind of knowing is much more than cognitive understanding. It is also emotional and describes a genuine relationship.

In the modern world, it can be difficult to convey the full range of responsibilities and qualities associated with good shepherding. In a rural society, these things are taken for granted. Not so in an urban one in which we seldom encounter anyone with the responsibility of caring for a herd of animals who can be quite defenseless without human intervention. Nevertheless, we don't need to get very far into John's chapter on this topic to grasp the seriousness of the work of the shepherd and the extent to which it goes beyond a mere job. That is why it is such a powerful image. And the feature of that description that remains with us is the recognition of the voice of the individual shepherd by the sheep for whom he cares. That one image tells us more about the relationship between a shepherd and his flock than any other attribute. But if we pause to contemplate this for a moment, we quickly realize that we are able to distinguish between the voices of a large number of people in our acquaintance --- it is one of the things that points most powerfully to a genuine relationship.

The passage from John 10 offers us one of seven '*I am*' sayings in John's gospel, "monologues in which Jesus reveals his identity to his followers." The other six are: *Bread of Life; Light of the world; Gate; Resurrection and Life; Way, Truth and Life; and True Vine*. And if we examine these closely, we see that they "cover the spectrum of human need and divine provision." We all need nourishment, a gate to access a path, and a leader to direct us toward a meaningful life. Thus, we all need a good shepherd which is why this image speaks to us in such a forceful way.

But if we are too absorbed in a "warm, gentle glow of safety" generated by the image of the good shepherd, we can lose sight of what is most emphatically emphasized here: Jesus is criticizing the leadership of Israel. The goodness of the true shepherd "comes at a cost:" the true good shepherd will lay down his life for his flock, but this is a result that arises out of conflict. If we lose sight of the political dimension, the story of how Jesus came to pose a threat to the established order, we lose the whole point. The contrast between Jesus and the "bad" shepherds of Israel has other implications. Jesus, for example, has a very close identification with his followers, and this is expressed through the verb "knowing." To

say that Jesus knows his sheep (and they in turn know him) implies that those who *don't* know him, and do *not* believe in him, are *not* his own. Their refusal to acknowledge Jesus as the Christ “has defined their status with respect to him.” Jesus actually knows his own first, before they know him. Thus, his own merely respond in kind. And knowing “suggests a deep acceptance and comfort (which imply) a (wide) sense of belonging and identification with the object.” And this is reflected in John’s famous prologue: “he was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet *the world did not know him...He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.*”

But this kind of knowing takes us back to God the Father. First, God knows Jesus, and Jesus thus knows God. This means there is reciprocity, but it is reciprocity that contains within it, a priority: that priority expresses the will of God, and Jesus demonstrates the response. In the same way, Jesus first knows his people, and they respond to him. This kind of knowing involves a “deep intimacy.” Only that intimacy could explain the idea of “laying down one’s life for one’s sheep.”

But there is an element here that would have been more deeply troubling to a Jewish audience. Jesus says that *other sheep in other folds* will become part of his flock. This implies the inclusion of non-Jews into the people of God. Of course, this was not an entirely new idea. Jewish prophecy had long held that all peoples would ultimately be “united in worshiping God.” This unity, however, was “usually seen in the context of Israel’s victorious battle against the nations” which had occupied the homeland and held her people in abject subservience. So, when Jesus suggests that “some *of Israel* and some *of the nations* will become his flock and respond to his voice,” it is quite shocking. However, Jesus was not engaging in “nationalistic triumphalism;” rather, he was simply acknowledging that some people heretofore excluded were to participate in “intimate relationship” with him and with God the Father.

All of this meant that the “sharply dualistic portrayal of the role of shepherd” resulted in conflict ---- first, because of the intimate portrait Jesus provided of his relationship with God (which bordered on sacrilege), and secondly, the idea that non-Jews were to be included in that relationship which required a complete re-thinking of the relationship of Israel with the rest of the world for a people who had always clung to the idea of having a very special relationship with Yahweh which made them distinct. Now, if the Pharisees held two views of Jesus: how to categorize him: either as *threatening* or as the *healer* who could not be possessed of demonic forces, this tells us that Jesus was controversial, and his words had the power to alter the political landscape.

One thing we can be certain of --- Jesus is defining his role as the good shepherd as one who is not in it for his own profit. For him, the supreme test will come when he’s faced with a choice. “The false shepherd saves his prospects at the cost of his reputation. The true shepherd shows who he is by being prepared to die for the sheep.” Jesus is using a very down-to-earth parable or metaphor to make his point: “the sheep are facing danger; the shepherd will go to meet it and, if necessary, take upon himself the fate

that would otherwise befall the sheep.” Although the prospect of a dead shepherd is hardly uplifting, this image also embraces the expansive role he undertakes in giving up his life for the sheep: his message will enlarge the flock by “bringing in a whole lot of very different sheep” ---- non-Jews and gentile nations.

Thus, we are confronted with the question: “how does this passage of shepherd and sheep connect with the post-resurrection reality of the Christ who intersects with our lives across time and space?” Well, first the image of the shepherd who will lay down his life for his sheep is clarified by “the reality that death has been withstood and conquered by the shepherd.” The test of the true shepherd is “proven by comparison against those who do not care for the sheep.” Jesus the Good Shepherd is affirmed by the intimate relationship between God the Father and God the Son which we can observe in the faith of Jesus converted into action. For us, then, to know Jesus is to know God.

“Recognition of the shepherd’s voice” is the key to the passage. We listen prior to recognizing and responding to a sound, a signal, a mark of true relationship. And we continue to listen because we are filled with hope when we do so. On this 4th Sunday in Easter, we shift from an historical recounting of the events following the resurrection to Christological reflection – that is, to understanding what all of this means in light of *who Christ is* in the final analysis. The goal of the image of the Good Shepherd is to help us to understand what happened and continues to happen *to us as the flock of the Good Shepherd* in the wake of these extraordinary events.

O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen

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