

27 Fourth Sunday of Easter
Acts 2:14, 36-41

Year A
Psalm 23 1Peter 2:20-25

May 7, 2017
John 10:1-10

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is known as Good Shepherd Sunday. As well, each year the Pope designates this Sunday as the *World Day of Prayer for Vocations* when the faithful are called to pray especially for vocations to the ministerial priesthood and religious life. Our Holy Father, Pope Francis, has chosen this Sunday because of its Good Shepherd theme.

Although we may have wonderfully romantic pictures of a shepherd's life, it is a very difficult and demanding life. There is one detail that provides a focus for some reflection today. Jesus says that the sheep follow the shepherd because they recognize his voice. Consider the people who were listening to Jesus in today's Gospel. They know that sheep do in fact recognize the voice or sound of the shepherd who cares for them, and they trustingly follow that voice.

The shepherd acts as the gate for the sheepfold. When the sheep hear the shepherd's voice calling them, they pass into the gate through his hands as he examines each one in turn, applies healing olive oil to any scratches or bruises, and gives each one a drink of cool water. Dry, dusty eyes are soothed from a cup of overflowing water.

Flocks of sheep are protected from the wild animals of the night in an area surrounded by a low wall. When all have passed through the gate, the shepherd lies across the entrance to protect the sheep from all prowling predators.

In today's Gospel Jesus gives us an image that He is the Good Shepherd when He says, "I am the gate for the sheep." Jesus is the Shepherd who calls us by the name we received at our Baptism. He is the only gate to the fullness of life, the eternal kingdom. No one can go to the Father except through Jesus.

As our Good Shepherd, Jesus examines each one of us. We feel our life being examined in the light of His teaching. He shows up our bruises and hurts caused by sin in order to heal us in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, or Confession. He offers us food and drink from the overflowing cup at the Eucharistic celebration.

Jesus is telling us that He knows us individually and thinks so much of each one of us that He cannot let us out of His sight. The fact that we have a special place in His heart should instill hope in us and increase our love for Christ. Even when sin causes us to wander and stray, our Good Shepherd is there to come to our rescue. Jesus searches for us and brings us back, carrying us safely home to the fold of His Holy Church.

In the parable, the sheep will not follow a stranger, but will “run from him” because they do not recognize his voice. If we desire the eternal life Jesus came to offer us, we need to respond to His voice just as the sheep in the parable respond to the voice of the shepherd. We need to follow Jesus and run from any “stranger” who will snatch us from Him. These strangers could be addictions, pornography, anger, pride, hatred, or a lack of forgiveness, to name a few. Strangers are anyone that lead us astray. As well, remember that the quiet voice of Satan is always tempting us, just waiting for us to be led astray.

Jesus makes a bold promise. He will give eternal life to those who are His sheep, and He will not allow anyone to take them away from Him, unless it is by their choice. He will care for them, guide them, and comfort them.

Jesus says, “Whoever enters by me will be saved...” Jesus offers us the care and security which enable us to enjoy true freedom. Just as the sheep in today’s Gospel give a positive, eager response to the shepherd’s voice, so too should we follow Jesus and listen to His voice. When we know the love of our Shepherd for us, such a response is not difficult. When we know Jesus as our Good Shepherd, we will gladly follow Him. And when we do follow the path of Jesus, we will have life, and have it abundantly.

However, the relationship has to be two-way. The sheep have to choose to belong to Jesus and His flock. Similarly we each have to make a personal commitment to follow Jesus for life and listen to His voice. Jesus will not, or cannot, save people against their will, but if we do choose to listen to the voice of Jesus and follow Him and remain faithful, Jesus promises to give us eternal life.

To follow Jesus does not mean we will be guaranteed an easy life here on earth. The opposite is more likely to be the case. Those who belong to Jesus often endure suffering in their lives, but those who remain steadfast through their trials will share in

Jesus' glory in heaven. In the Second Reading, the writer says that trials and sufferings are an opportunity to prove one's faith and trust in our Lord.

The flock of sheep in today's Gospel is an image of community. We too have a deep need for community. In the Catholic community we will find mutual support, encouragement, and companionship. We cannot belong to Jesus without belonging also to His flock. The privilege of belonging is not something that is offered to a chosen few, but to everyone.

In our contemporary society, the call of Christ can easily be crowded out by many other voices. How easily we can be enticed away by the must-have shouts of the world, the constant ring of cell phones, or the many inner voices that call us to various addictions and self-serving life decisions.

On this World Day of Prayer for Vocations, let us pray earnestly for vocations for more priests and sisters to become our much needed good shepherds of God's flock. Let us reach out in our community and find if there is someone who is willing to dedicate his or her life to becoming a joyful shepherd of God's children.

Whatever work God has given you to do, whether it is the priesthood, religious life, the married life, the single life, or the separated life, you are very important. Through every little act you do for someone, you have an opportunity to say yes to Jesus, an opportunity to witness to your faith, an opportunity to bear Christ's light to another person, an opportunity to help build up the kingdom of God, and an opportunity to be a good shepherd to someone in need.

During these weeks of Easter, let us re-commit ourselves to listen more closely to Christ, and to see in Him the one and only gate to more abundant life with Him as our Good Shepherd.