

4th Sunday of Easter

The Risen Christ is our Good Shepherd who knows us intimately, takes care of us, protects us and lays down his life willingly for us. Jesus willingly lays down his life to save his sheep. For Jesus, his role as the Good Shepherd is not a profession but an option which he freely and voluntarily chooses of his own accord; it is in no way forced on him. His deepest love for the sheep motivates him to sacrifice his life to save and give life to them.

Jesus compares his intimate relationship with the sheep, to the intimacy which he shares with his Father. He says that he knows his sheep very intimately and the sheep whom he calls “my own” also know him. This word “to know” is used throughout the Scripture not for knowing something intellectually or theoretically or for knowing someone as an acquaintance, but to describe the most intimate, personal and experiential relationship that one can have.

The other sheep that do not belong to Jesus’ fold’ certainly refer to the Gentiles. He will bring them also, of course, not directly but through the missionary efforts of his disciples. One day they will listen to his voice and both the Jews and the Gentiles will become one flock (community) under one Shepherd that is, under Him.

One of the most prominent, ancient and common pictures of Jesus in Christian art is that of the shepherd tending his sheep or carrying it in his arms or on shoulders. Today’s gospel text, given in the context of Easter Season, poses this question for us: Who is Risen Lord for us and what does he do for us? The Risen Lord is our Good Shepherd who knows us, takes care of us, protects us and even today lays down or sacrifices his life for us (in the Eucharist). As our Good Shepherd, the Risen Christ protects us from so many ‘wolves’ such as evil, sin, worldly or ungodly ways, bad companions, misleading guides, false teachers and unbecoming and unworthy leaders. So, this gospel text invites us to experience the shepherding role of the Risen Lord, which consists in constantly saving us by protecting and defending us from all these ‘wild animals.’

Jesus freely and willingly lays down his life of his own accord out of love for us. Jesus continues to protect and defend us against our spiritual enemies even after his death because he

laid down his life in order to take it up again, that is, rise from the dead and remain with us to defend us till the end of our lives.

If we want come under our Good Shepherd's flock, we need to know him intimately as he knows us personally and intimately and be familiar with his voice. Knowing him also means to be in constant communion with him. This is possible, only through a depth level communication with him in prayer, meditation on the Word of God and recognition of him in all situations and among the needy and the suffering. As the sheep of Christ, we are constantly in danger of falling victim to misleading guides, false propaganda, corruption, addictions like drugs and alcoholism, marital unfaithfulness and betrayal in priestly or religious life. The Risen Lord is ready to protect us from these 'wild animals' (evils or evil powers), if we listen to his voice and submit ourselves to his care. He cares for us by protecting us and nourishing us through the Eucharist.

Though we are more familiar with the traditional application of the shepherd's imagery to the shepherding role of the Church leaders, such as bishops and priests, we can broadly apply it to all those who are in a position of leadership in families, society and the Church. Persons who hold any position of leading/ guiding/ directing others are like shepherds to the people under their care. Those who hold such positions should ask this question: How can I become a good shepherd in my family, society and the Church?

Today's good shepherd is a father in the family who spends some time with his children to guide and direct them in spite of his busy schedule; a mother who nurses, cares and supports a sick/ disobedient/ mischievous child; a teacher who teaches human, moral and spiritual values and character to students besides regular lessons, or spends extra time to teach dull students; a student who visits his/her sick classmate, though not a friend; a doctor who treats a life-threatening illness of a poor patient for a lower fees; a parish council member who visits a member who does not attend meetings; an officer who stands for the rights of the poor; a friend who protects his/her friend from danger and evil habits, etc. Let us ask ourselves whether we are shepherds after God's own heart, or false shepherds who do nothing to strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, bring back the strayed, seek after the lost, or to prevent our people from getting scattered (Ez 34:4-6).