

4th Sunday of Easter

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday and Vocation Sunday and the word of God presents us with two images, the Children of God and the Good Shepherd. In today's gospel passage Jesus emphasizes the sacrifice of his own self and his life itself indicating that he is the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. The scriptures tell us of the extraordinary love of God for us has taken in Jesus in the form of a good shepherd. The image of the Good Shepherd was perhaps the favorite early Christian image of our Savior and has a long tradition in the history of God's people. It is one that would be immediately understood by the people of the time. We have the popular pictures of Jesus the Good Shepherd carrying a sheep over his shoulders, or we have a smiling Jesus sitting under a tree, with a little lamb on his lap. This image of the shepherd appeals to us because it shows the tenderness of Jesus and his compassion. A shepherd in general did not walk behind the flock beating them with a stick to keep them moving. He walked in front of them, seeking a safe path to food, water and shelter.

When we see this image, our minds naturally begin to wander, and we realize its personal meaning for us. We are that lamb or sheep who is being carried by Jesus on his shoulders. Such an image is reassuring for us as Jesus is always our support on our journey through life. When we face difficult problems or crosses come our way or some personal disasters occur, the presence of Jesus the Good Shepherd reassures us that we are not abandoned, that Jesus is supporting and holding us up. This is portrayed very beautifully in the poem, Footprints which concludes in this way: "I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life there has only been one set of footprints in the sand. Why, when I needed you most, have you not been there for me?" The Lord replied, "The years when you have seen only one set of footprints, my child, is when I carried you." Again Psalm 23 reads: "The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want."

In today's Gospel Reading Jesus uses the image of the Shepherd and the sheep. The relationship between the shepherd and the sheep is so intimate that it is an extension of the relationship between the Heavenly Father and the Son. We heard the words of Jesus: "My sheep hear my voice and follow me." In this particular passage from the Gospel of John, Jesus was speaking of His Divine title as the Good Shepherd. The sheep listen to and

recognize the voice of their shepherd and that is why they continue to follow him rather than another. Since Jesus is the Good Shepherd and not a hired hand, he does not run away when the wolf comes, instead, he is ready to give his life for his sheep.+

Jesus as a shepherd shows a deep sense of commitment and responsibility towards his own. He is a leader who is concerned about others and hence there is attractiveness in him. Secondly, there is the knowledge of the shepherd. Every good shepherd knows that his sheep know him, and he knows his own sheep. There is mutual understanding and love between them. This mutual bond of love and intimacy is often compared to the mutual relationship between Jesus and his Father. The shepherd knows his sheep and the sheep acknowledge their shepherd. Thirdly, the good shepherd deeply desires that many other sheep should come to identify themselves with him. This in fact is the call of the kingdom of God that there may be one flock and one shepherd.

Jesus is the good shepherd caring for his sheep. We see here: Work of the Shepherd – to rescue them, to lead them home, to feed them, to search out the lost ones and the least ones, to guide them, defend and protect them, treat with affection. The knowledge of the Shepherd – he knows them, loves them, he knows each by name personally. He calls the sheep by name, and they come. He is the door for them. ‘They are mine’ he says as they personally belong to him. The aim and dedication are to lay down his life for the sheep not just once but forever. He wants them always to belong to him. The zeal of the Shepherd is to get other sheep that are not in the fold. He wants all of them. He came in search of the lost ones, Luke 19:10.

God our Father is the true Good Shepherd. He is present everywhere watching over all creatures! His care is for everyone, and his Love has no limit. He watches over each of his children with equal care! All that he desires is that we go to him, in Christ, in order that we too might be one with him. If we are one with Christ, then we will be able to say, as the Lord: “I and the Father are one.” In fact, it is not we who will speak this word, but rather Christ who will speak it for us, for only he is the equal of God, being God himself. But, in order for Jesus to be able to speak on our behalf, let us receive him within us, during today’s Holy Communion. Let us ask Mary, our mother, to help us to receive within us the Lord, King of the Universe.