

Shepherd of Our Souls

Texts: Acts 2:42-47
1 Peter 2:19-25 (Series A, 4 Sunday of Easter) Ps. 23
John 10:1-10

Prayer :

"Truly I assure you: Whoever does not enter the sheepfold through the gate but climbs in some other way is a thief and marauder"

Jesus' life and teachings are full of surprises. He came to a generation of people who were expecting a "**conquering-hero**" type of Messiah and He told them that the Messiah would suffer and die as a common criminal.

What a surprise! He came to a generation that, like ours, was steeped in the philosophy of revenge-an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life. He told them to turn the other cheek; to go the second mile; to love enemies, pray for them, forgive them. What a surprise! Jesus says that if we deliberately set out to save our life, we will lose it.

What a surprise! Jesus' teachings are full of surprises like this, but probably none greater than the one St. John refers to in today's Gospel Lesson. In it, Jesus depicts His relationship with us in terms of Shepherd and sheepfold.

This is not surprising. Jesus frequently employed this imagery because sheep were the principal occupation of his people. If we are to learn from today's text, as the people of Jesus' time understood well, the relationship between a good shepherd and his flock. For us, it seems to come to us as a big surprise, however, of not being able to enter into the Good Shepherd's sheepfold except by just one gate.

It is one teaching of Jesus that continually surprises us, no matter how many times we've heard it. The picture is clear and simple. It is a judgment stories from the Middle East literature: the king; separates (just and unjust); eternal life or eternal punishment. But now, to the sheep and the goats, to the just and the unjust, both, comes the great surprise-two great surprises, really.

The sheep on Jesus' right (the just) are astonished to find the degree to which Jesus has identified Himself with the needy. They haven't been ministering to Christ; they've merely been feeding hungry people and putting clothes on the poor and taking care of the sick. They are completely surprised to hear Jesus say that when they were doing that, they were ministering to Him.

Secondly, those on the left (the unjust) are even more surprised to hear Jesus identify Himself so completely with the poor and the oppressed. They're shocked, really. If they had known that Christ was in need, of course they would have done anything for Him.

But they hadn't ministered to all those poor people and helpless people and sick people they had seen because they were too busy being religious and pious and worrying about the letter of the law. What a shock! What a surprise it was to learn that in not ministering to them, they had rejected Christ.

We must admit that many of us have not come to terms with this as yet. The second great surprise really caps the climax. Those on the right and those on the left, both, are astonished to discover the high premium God places upon this ministry to others. Life is all about others.

Here they are, in symbolism now, their eternal destiny being determined. And what is the question? It's not a question of how often they had gone to Church. It's not a question of what theological books they had read.

It's not a question of what academic degrees they had earned. It's not a question of how much money they had possessed. It's not a question of what part of the city or what part of the country or what part of the world they had lived in.

It's not a question of skin colour or physical attributes. These questions are not raised. There is only one question. Just one question!!! Did you feed the hungry? Did you take care of the sick? Did you visit those who are in prison and in special need? That's the only question? What a surprise! The more so because worship and belonging to the Church and to study groups and making an honest living are very important and we know they are.

But, in the end, it comes down to this: God places the highest value on the simple ministry of fulfilling other people's needs. We want a sense of perspective here. Don't we? Jesus is not saying that this is the whole Christian life. He is saying that this is where it comes out. This is the fruit of all of the *effort*, the fruit of all of the *worship*, the fruit of all of the *prayer*, the fruit of all of the *Bible Study* and the *theological probing*.

This is where it comes out. This kind of love, as Paul said, is the one thing that lasts beyond all others. And if we don't have it, then we don't really have anything. We need to understand it in this perspective because Jesus does not bring this teaching to us as a **threat**. It comes to us as a **promise**. Having a **"quality"** of life with God.

On the feed lots on the prairies, ranchers bring their cattle to a common grazing ground, known as '*Feed Lot*.' On those feed lots you will find hundreds of cattle mingling around feeding from early summer to after harvest or just before winter sets in. When the time comes for the rancher to take his / her cattle home they are sought through by the brand marks on their skin.

During Jesus' time, shepherds mingled their flocks into one large flock for easier movement from grazing area to another. Each shepherd called to his sheep from time to time when they were lambs. They learned to know his voice and they would follow him when he called them out of the sheepcote.

The fact is, there are many voices out there in our world today, each telling us what to do: We have the voice of God, Satan, our own voice, and voices of other religions promising us '**God within**' etc.

But the sheep recognize the voice of a stranger and would not follow. With all these confusing voices around us today it is imperative that we know the right voice, and the only way to find out that right voice is through what says in the Scriptures, I believe. Those who had been baptized devoted themselves to the apostles' *teaching* and *fellowship*, to the *breaking of bread* and *prayers*. [Acts 2:42]

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake. [Psalm 23:1-2]

We who want to know ourselves as true and faithful Christians must rouse ourselves from our sheepdom and listen for the Voice that *calls*, and then *follow*, in earnest and in confidence. All we "have" on this earthly plain is temporary. Let us not go *astray like sheep*, but rely only on the Lamb of God, Jesus the Christ, Risen and Eternal.

Just as God knows each and everyone of us from the time of conception to birth, he called us through our parents, pastors, Sunday school teachers and godly people. There is no question that Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

The only question that remains at this point in the service is this: *Do you know the Shepherd of your soul?* How you answer that question determines the quality of life you have with God and where you can expect to spend eternity.

Jesus is telling us that the most important thing for us to do in attaining this quality of life is to take seriously this ministry to those in need. Case in point during this global Covid-19 pandemic with several conspiracy theories floating around to create panic and uncertainty. For the believer our sense of security is the outstanding characteristics of this Good Shepherd is that: *He loves us, He cares for us. He knows us. He died for us. Amen*