

4th Sunday of Easter

What is the one word that you repeatedly heard in the gospel of today? Shepherd. Where else did you hear it? In the Responsorial Psalm. “The Lord is my Shepherd; there is nothing I shall want,” was the refrain. Today is Good Shepherd Sunday, and we are invited to reflect on Christ, the Good Shepherd. The pastor of a rich suburban parish was speaking to the Sunday school kids. He told them that as the pastor, he was the shepherd and the members of his congregation were the sheep. He then put this question to them: “What does the shepherd do for the sheep?” A little fellow in the front row raised his hand and answered, “He fleeces them.”

The first reading, in the concluding words of his first gospel proclamation, Peter gives a summary of the whole gospel message: who Jesus is, how He saves us, and how we should respond. Peter tells the people: “You crucified your God and Messiah, but He has risen from death and offers you forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” In the second reading: 1 Peter 2: 20-25: the "shepherd" reference in the last verse links it to the day's gospel. “For you had gone astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd, the guardian of your souls” (vv. 24-25). For a long time the Jewish people had used the Good Shepherd image for God. It is all over in the Old Testament—used by Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Zechariah and, of course, by David in his Psalms. “Like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, carrying them in his bosom, and leading the ewes with care” (Isaiah 40:11). Ezekiel foretells what the Messiah will do as a good shepherd. “I myself will tend my sheep ... I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak” (Ezekiel 34: 15-16).

The Good Shepherd image in the New Testament is a synonym for selfless love, sincerity, commitment and sacrificial service. Hence, Jesus selects it as the most fitting term to denote his life and mission (Mt 18:2, 9:36, 26:31, Lk 15:4, 12:32, Mk 6:34, 14:27, I Pet 2: 25, Heb.123:20). Jesus refers to himself as the Shepherd and the Gate. He meant what he said. It is important to be careful about words. An Episcopalian priest in a remote corner

of England who wanted a substitute priest for a weekend, telegraphed his bishop: "*My wife just passed away. Please dispatch a substitute for the weekend.*" Jesus was the good Shepherd and the gate-way. The first title represents His ownership because Shepherd is the true owner of the sheep. The second title represents His leadership. In Palestine at the time of Jesus, the shepherds used to bring the sheep together in the pen to protect them at night. There will be only one door, and the shepherd used to sleep literally in front of the door so that no wild animals could enter the pen without having to wake up the shepherd. Thus the shepherd himself was the door. Jesus is the Gate—the only way. He is the one Mediator between God and mankind. All must go through Him, through His Church, in order to arrive in Heaven. By identifying himself with the sheep-gate, Jesus gives the assurance that whoever enters the pen through Him will be safe and well cared for.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday, and the Church invites us to pray for more good shepherds—to pray for more vocations. Fostering vocations is the task of the entire community. Vocations to priesthood and a consecrated life do not just come from the sky. They come from good families. Therefore we have to pray for families and do everything we can to promote family values. Parents must respect and encourage a child who shows an interest in becoming a priest or deacon or of entering upon a consecrated life. Parents need to encourage their children, including their teenagers and young adults, to participate actively in the children's and youth activities in the parish—like Sunday school, youth conferences, retreats and youth associations. They should also encourage and actively support them in becoming altar servants, gift-bearers, lectors and ministers of hospitality. Everyone who is entrusted with the care of others is a shepherd. Hence, pastors, parents, teachers, doctors, nurses, government officials, etc., are all shepherds. We become good shepherds by loving those entrusted to us, praying for them, spending our time, talents and blessings for their welfare, and guarding them from physical and spiritual dangers. Let us encourage and promote vocations in our families and carry out our responsibilities as good shepherds.