

## 4th Sunday of Easter C

A man dressed in an expensive suit got out of his Mercedes, approached a shepherd guarding his flock, and asked, “Will you give me one of your sheep, if I can tell you the exact number in this flock?” The shepherd accepts. “973,” says the man. The shepherd, astonished at the accuracy, said, “I am a man of my word; take the sheep you have won.” The man picks an ‘animal’ and begins to walk away. “Wait,” cries the shepherd, “Let me have a chance to get even.” “Will you return my animal if I tell you what your job is?” “Sure,” replies the man. “You are an economist or in a government think tank,” says the shepherd. “Amazing!” said the man. “How did you deduce that?” “Well,” says the shepherd, “you drove into my field uninvited. You asked me to pay you for information I already knew, you answered questions I haven’t asked, and you know nothing about my business. Now put down my dog; it is not a sheep.”

Today’s liturgy centers upon the image of the Good Shepherd. We are invited to meditate on our Savior’s merciful tenderness. Today we are also called to pray for the good shepherds whom he has left us to guide us and keep us in his name. Christ is the chief shepherd. In the gospel of last Sunday, we saw how Jesus made St. Peter the chief shepherd of his flock. The shepherd symbol which Jesus has claimed for himself is passed on to Peter. He must continue our Lord’s mission and be his representative on earth. As the Second Vatican Council points out, “Jesus Christ put Peter at the head of the other apostles, and in him he set up a lasting and visible source and foundation of the unity of both faith and communion.” There is a Latin saying which says, *Ubi Petrus ibi Ecclesia*—“where Peter is, there is the Church.” In the Old Testament God sent many leaders, kings, and prophets to shepherd his people of Israel. In the New Testament Jesus claimed the title and the responsibility of the Good Shepherd. He loved and cared for his flock even to the extent of giving up his life for them.

The Good Shepherd knows his sheep. A good shepherd knows the sheep. God knows each of us by our name. We cannot run away from him. Even when we go away from him he comes after us, inviting us back lovingly and tenderly. He is the one who leaves the 99 and goes after the one that has strayed. He knows what our needs are even before we ask him. If we accept him as the chief shepherd, he will lead us on the right path. He will warn us of dangers and potholes on our path. When we submit ourselves to him, he will protect us. When we have him as our shepherd, we are safe. He will protect us even to the extent of death.

The Gospel of today also speaks of the marks of sheep. “My sheep hear my voice, and they follow me.” The Scribes and Pharisees refused to listen to him and follow him, so they excluded themselves from his flock. The closer we are to the shepherd, the better we are able to hear his voice. If you stand right in front of this speaker, you can hear everything loud and clear. When you walk away from here, you will hear less and less—and there will be a place where you cannot hear anything anymore. That is what happens when we walk away from the Lord, and walk in the path of the evil one. We are so far away from the Lord that we cannot hear him anymore.

One time a young man knocked at my door when I was in Ontario. It was a Monday—my day off. Anyway I opened the door, and he said he wanted to talk to someone very urgently. He talked for more than two hours. He was brought up on the East Coast by adopted parents. He left them when he was 18 and got into all kinds of evil and lived in a gay relationship. He wanted to get out of it and so went to Southern California. He reformed himself and some church hired him as a youth minister but fired him after six months. He felt that his gay friends from the East were following him and tormenting him. He became a junior pastor in another church but was fired again. He went to another place and started his own church. His friends from the East were tormenting him again. He became a street preacher in Seattle, but his friends were tormenting again. He told the police about his torments, and they could not figure out anything. He lived in Caldwell for a while but could not find any peace. So he came to live in Ontario. Still his friends were tormenting him. I realized that it was not his friends who were tormenting him but his sins and guilt. So I asked him if he was prepared to admit his sins and seek forgiveness from God. He did not say anything but walked out. When we have gone too far from the Lord, it is harder to hear his voice and harder to get back. But fortunately for this young man, a year later he came back, and this time he was visibly a different person. He said he made his confession and he felt a huge weight lifted.

If we are the sheep of his flock, we need to hear his voice and conform our lives to his teachings. We who belong to him as his sheep must follow him faithfully as a soldier follows his commander. Jesus is the seal of our hearts and light of our path. Today God sends us many shepherds to lead and guide us. We need many more good shepherds. Let us pray that God will send us many more shepherds.