

Sermon | Easter 4 *Misericordias*

John 10:1-10

3 May 2020

Alleluia. Christ is risen. **He is risen indeed. Alleluia.**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The meditation is from the Holy Gospel just read, and one verse from our Epistle, 1 Peter 2:25

“For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”

VERBUM DOMINI.

We always hear it on this Fourth Sunday of Easter. What we commonly call Good Shepherd Sunday.

And that is, one of the most pervasive and comforting pictures of the entire Bible:

The image of God as our shepherd, and we as his sheep.

We find this language throughout the Scriptures that God, the LORD, Yahweh, is himself the shepherd of Israel:

Ps. 77:20—you lead your people like a flock.

Ps. 79:13—we, your people, the sheep of your pastures, will give thanks to you.

Ps. 80:1—give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock.

Ps. 95, we sing it every Matins—he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.

And of course the Psalm that attends the dying,

Ps. 23—The LORD is my shepherd. I shall not want.

David was a man after God’s own heart. And we remember how David, before becoming king of Israel was a shepherd. But a brave shepherd David was. Because David would often put his own life on the line for his sheep. Remember when King Saul was reluctant to send young David into battle against Goliath, David said that in his past, he had fought lions, killing them with his bare hands, to spare the lives of his sheep. And now he was ready to do it again, ready to fight for Israel, to put himself between the enemy, and God’s sheep, and defend them, and protect them from Goliath.

Most shepherds don’t act this way. Most shepherds only see the sheep as a means to an end. If they love them, it is only for their wool and for their flesh. When the hired hand sees the wolf coming, he flees. He leaves the sheep shepherdless. Why? Because he loves his own life more than the sheep. And he wouldn’t get anywhere near that close to death as David, who loved the sheep, and risked his life for the sheep. Plenty of shepherds in Israel had come and gone over generations. Ezekiel 34 is a passage where God is calling the prophet to prophesy against the false shepherds of his day who had used the sheep like this, only as a means to an end. Here is what God says:

“Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³ You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴ The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. ⁵ So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts.

So what will God do in response to the shepherdless-ness of his people, people who have been abused and neglected by false shepherds who did not care for them? This is what God says, verse 23:

²³ And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.

Wait a minute. Ezekiel is prophesying many years after King David lived and died. Who is God talking about? The Son of David, none other than Messiah.

So when Jesus comes into the world and says, “I AM the Good Shepherd,” this is what he is saying. I AM Messiah, David’s Son and David’s LORD, come to gather the wandering, scattered, lost sheep to myself:

Matthew 9:36—when [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

And remember what Jesus said to the Pharisees, who were scandalized that he was eating with tax collectors and sinners?

Lk. 15:4—“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and search for the lost one until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.”

Christ, the true shepherd, the Good Shepherd, the Son of David, man after God’s own heart, but not just man, even God himself, the LORD, Yahweh, “the LORD is my shepherd,” that’s Jesus, come to shepherd the people of God.

But there is something that distinguishes our Lord from every other shepherd in the world: and not only false shepherds, but even David, and all the other true shepherds who come in his name.

What makes Jesus unique, alone the Good Shepherd, is not that he cares for us, that he protects us, that he leads us to green pastures and still waters, where we are looked after, and fed and nourished. Plenty of other shepherds care for their sheep too. But Jesus is truly unique from all the other shepherds in the world in this way:

He dies for the sheep. He says it five times in this chapter 10 of St. John’s Gospel: “*I lay down my life.*”

He allows that ancient wolf, death, to devour him. He lays down his own life, trusting that God the Father will take it up again. So he goes into the valley of the shadow of death for us. He puts himself into the jaws of that ancient wolf to be devoured, so that his sheep might be spared. Because he is the Good Shepherd. He loves the sheep more than his own life. He doesn’t love them because of what he gets from them, and stops loving them the minute they stop giving to him. The Good Shepherd loves the sheep purely for their own sake, more than himself.

And what does it mean then, to be a sheep in the Good Shepherd’s hand? The sheep see what their Shepherd has done, how their Shepherd has bled and died for them, how he was raised for them. And when the sheep see what their Shepherd has done, shedding his blood for their redeeming, they love him for it. And they are glad to call him their Shepherd. Glad to hear his voice, and follow where he leads. Because they trust him. And this is what faith is. This is what unites the sheep to their Good Shepherd: faith. And faith is no mere historical knowledge of something. Even the demons know that Jesus is the Son of God. They know that he died and rose again. But the demons do not believe in him.

Because the essence of faith is trust—the trust of the heart that clings to Christ alone, and believes that, if the Good Shepherd has gone this far and done this much, if he has given himself into death for me, to find me in my wandering, carry my burden on my shoulders, and restore me to the fold—he will not abandon me. He will stick with me in trouble. He will walk beside me in the valley of the shadow of death. He will be there with me, when my last hour comes. And when in my life, I stray, he will be patient with me. He will bring me back to himself by the rod of the Law, and by the staff of the Gospel. He will call me from my aimless wandering, and gather me up together with his whole Church.

And even when my Good Shepherd leads me into dark and dangerous places, even there, I will trust in him. For I know that while I may not know what the Lord is doing in each and every circumstance of life, I trust that he is using all things, even the sad experiences and the dark, dangerous places, to draw me ever closer to him, to train my ears to listen even more attentively for his living voice. And even more, I know that while I hear my Shepherd, my Shepherd hears me. He listens to my bleatings, my pleas, my cries for mercy. He hears my prayers, and he answers me. He takes all my wants and concerns before the Throne of Grace, so that my heavenly Father hears them too. And, he calls me by Name. For in Baptism, he has named me, and even more than this, in Baptism, he has put his own Divine Name upon me, branded and marked me with the Sign of the Holy Cross, as we hear in the Baptismal Liturgy: “*receive the sign of the cross both upon your forehead and upon your heart to mark you as one redeemed by Christ the crucified.*” We are sheep who have been marked and branded, so that when the enemies of the Cross see our branding, they know to whom we belong.

All of this is true of Christ, the Good Shepherd, and we as his sheep. But today, we get another metaphor besides “shepherd.” In the first ten verses of John’s Gospel, Jesus calls himself the Door. He says in verse 7, “I am the door of the sheep.” It has been said that in First Century Palestine, a sheepfold would often be a circular enclosure, with one gap in the circle, that was the sheep gate. And the shepherd would lay himself down at night in that gate, to close the circle.

So the shepherd literally became the door of the sheepfold. And this served two purposes it kept the sheep in so that they wouldn’t wander out. And it kept the enemies out so they couldn’t come in. So that, if the shepherd is the Door, if he lays himself down between the sheep and the wolves, the only way the wolves can get to the sheep is over the shepherd’s dead body. If Jesus is calling himself the Door, it means that he has put himself, between us and our enemies. And this is

nothing else than the Doctrine of the Atonement: Christ, putting himself between us and our enemies, sin, death, and the devil, and giving his life for ours, substituting his perfect, holy life as a sacrifice to satisfy the wrath of God, and the Law's punishment, that we might be spared from punishment, forgiven, justified, renewed, and on the Last Day, saved.

If Jesus is the Door, it means another thing. It means that he is the only way to salvation and eternal life. He is the way we enter the Church, the way we come into God's kingdom: through Jesus' death and resurrection. Remember what St. Paul says in Romans 6 about your Baptism. He says that in Baptism you were crucified with Christ. Buried with him by baptism into his death, raised out of the water to new and resurrected life, you have taken that same paschal journey with Jesus out of death and into life. You have gone through the Door, and have been brought into the Sheepfold, the Church.

So that, the only way to life and salvation is through Christ, the Door.

This is the mark by which we can distinguish true and false shepherds. Verse 1 of today's Gospel says, "*He who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber.*" In other words, false shepherds will try to get at you any way but by the Door. Any preacher who comes proclaiming a message other than Christ crucified for sinners is a false shepherd. Any preacher who teaches you to rely on your own works, or to follow your heart rather than the Word, or promises you health and wealth if you follow him or her—that one is a false shepherd.

But true shepherds will tell you the only way to life and salvation is through faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ alone. It is only through the Door that we go in and out to green pastures and quiet waters of God's paradise. It is only in Christ that we have the forgiveness of all our sins, life, salvation, and justification before God. So we trust him. We follow him. We hear his voice. And he goes before us, Christ the Good Shepherd, he that lays down his life for the sheep. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.