

3rd May 2020 (4th Sunday of Easter, Year A)

Acts 2:14,36-41; Psalm 22(23); 1 Peter 2:20-25; John 10:1-10.

'I am the gate of the sheepfold.'

Using a common contemporary pastoral image of the shepherd and his flock of sheep, Jesus speaks about his relationship with his followers. Shepherd leading their flocks to fresh green pastures was a common sight in Jesus' time. The shepherd takes out their flock by day, leading them to fresh green pastures to eat, and then returns them to the fold for the night. The image Jesus is using seems to imply that a number of shepherds brought their flock to the same fold for the night. There a gate keeper (security) kept watch over the sheep and made sure only the rightful shepherds gained access to the sheep entrusted to his care. This is the background image that Jesus uses for his teaching.

Jesus is the good shepherd who looks after his sheep. Every morning he comes, enters the sheepfold, and calls his sheep, one by one, by name. The sheep, who recognise the voice of their shepherd, quickly gather around him, and he carefully leads them out and takes them to good pastures for their nourishment. The shepherd walks ahead of the sheep, leading the way; the role of the disciples is to follow the shepherd. Jesus' disciples will only follow his voice. They do not recognise the voice of any other shepherd who enters the fold and try to entice them to change their allegiance. The faithful sheep will only walk behind their shepherd; they trust that he has their good in their heart.

This setup does not guarantee that no one tries to steal sheep from the shepherd's flock. Even though there is security at the gate, some will also try to jump over the boundary wall to get to the sheep and to steal. Those leaders who do not enter the fold through the gate, are not true shepherds, but thieves and brigands. A shepherd has nothing to hide, so he is not afraid to face the security at the gate and request to enter the fold. The security, who knows the shepherd, is happy to welcome the shepherd and to give him access to his sheep. The proper way to the sheep is through the gate and not over the boundary fence. Leaders who do not follow the full teachings of the Law and the Prophets are scared to face the gate keeper; they do not have the right intentions. The security at the gate recognises that they are not true shepherds and refuses them entrance. Their only intention is to cause harm among the sheep.

While it is important for the sheep to be placed in a secure location for the night, it is equally important for them to be able to go out to find nourishment during the day. The sheep need to enter through the gate to be secure, and again walk through the gate to go and be nourished. Jesus is the one who can provide both security (eternal life) and nourishment to his disciples. It is through him that they can grow, get to know God, and be secure. Jesus compares himself to the gate to the sheepfold leading the sheep both in and out of the fold.

Jesus is committed to looking after me, as one of his sheep. He provides me nourishment through his word and his Body and Blood, he also guarantees that I find security in and through him. What is expected of me is to learn to recognise his voice and to always 'listen' to his voice. In life we can be challenged by different voices that call for our attention. Different shepherds come, trying to get our attention. I need to learn to be discerning to recognise which one is the voice of my shepherd, the one I have committed myself to through my Baptism.

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