

Rev. Derek Fairman

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter A

The Gospel on this Good Shepherd Sunday paints for us a picture of the Lord Jesus shepherding the flock, leading them and caring for them. It is a pleasant picture, and fills our hearts with joy, but this is not always how things happen in the Church. The Lord speaks of thieves and robbers, and those who do not care for the sheep. Yet the Lord explains that He is the Good Shepherd, that the Lord will not leave His disciples into the hands of those who are unworthy to be shepherds.

What about the sheep? The first thing about the sheep is that they follow the shepherd. Now, people sometimes object that this looks like the sheep do not have minds of their own, that somehow, they are following in a thoughtless way. The Lord describing the disciples as sheep was not intended to be insulting, or to say that His followers are thoughtless. No, the sheep following the shepherd means that the shepherd is giving the sheep guidance, so that they can find what they are looking for: good grazing ground, where they will find life.

We need help to find the spiritual goods that we are searching for. If we do not need help, then why did the Lord come down from Heaven? However, guidance is not the same as doing everything for someone. Guidance enhances that search, rather than replacing that search. Guidance means that the Lord does what is beyond us, but also leaves certain things to us.

For those called to the priesthood, yes, they are called to be shepherds. However, that does not mean that they do not have to follow the Lord as well. Those in Holy Orders are more closely following the Lord, the Good Shepherd. Having an active role in the Church never diminishes that need to follow; rather, the need for following, for imitating the Good Shepherd, is even greater. Without the desire to follow the Lord, it is easy for those with an active role to forget that the Lord is in charge, not they.

The sheep also listen to the voice of the shepherd. There are those who object that listening is somehow demeaning, that listening to the Lord's voice leaves little room for agency or thought. This is also not what the Lord means. Obedience does not mean that we leave behind our freedom or something like that. Obedience is first an acceptance of reality; we must accept reality for what it is, rather than what we want it to be. Obedience comes from the recognition that we are not the center of the universe. Obedience overcomes pride and selfish thoughts and behaviors. Obedience helps us to serve others as we should.

For those called to the priesthood, they too must possess obedience and a listening heart. They must be able to follow the Lord in fidelity, being able to withstand any obstacles in the way. Being in a leadership position does not mean that they do not need to listen to the voice of the Lord; those called to vocations in the Church must listen and follow the Lord even more. It is with a discerning heart, that those in leadership positions must listen to the voice of the Lord, to help others discern what the Lord is speaking to them.

For those called to the priesthood, yes, they must help those in their charge to find good grazing ground. They themselves, however, must find good grazing ground. They must have ears to listen to find where the Lord is leading them. The shepherds have additional needs than the sheep, perhaps, but they still need to have those needs met by the Lord Jesus. They must find life, if the shepherds are to lead others to life.

The call to follow the Lord more closely, to imitate the Good Shepherd, to take an active role in the Church, does not mean usurping the Lord's role in the Church. No matter what the shepherds in the Church might be like, that does not take away the Lord's own presence in the Church. The Lord Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and He does not abandon us.

Sometimes people are tempted to walk away from the Church because of the presence of sin, or because of a shepherd not imitating the Lord Jesus. This is understandable, but this only exposes the sheep to the wolves, because they are walking away, not from one person, but from the Lord Jesus Himself. Walking away from the Lord Jesus gives the evil one another victory, besides the evil he already accomplished. Walking away from the Lord Jesus means throwing away salvation because of someone else's actions.

It takes faith to recognize that the Lord Jesus does not abandon us. Sometimes it looks that way, particularly when there is a problem, or there are problems, in the Church. The Lord Jesus told us that He would be with us always, until the end of the world. The Lord Jesus is with us, in the Tabernacle, and in the Eucharist. The Lord's words are with us in the Scriptures that we hear. The Lord Jesus is with us, and we pray that we can recognize Him.

As we approach the altar, we pray for vocations to the priesthood, especially in our diocese, that the Lord will provide shepherds who are good and holy, imitating the holiness and goodness of the Good Shepherd. This is not always easy, but it is rewarding. We all must find a way to understand who the Lord has called us to be. We pray that the Holy Spirit will guide our young people to find their calling.