

Living Out the Example of ‘The Good Shepherd’

*The Second Sunday After Easter
(From the Gospel: St. John x. 11 ff.)*

11 I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. 12 But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. 13 The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine. 15 As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.

Jesus as the Good Shepherd is one of the most universal images of the Lord. No one, including those who neither believe in Him nor accept Him, would doubt for one moment precisely who is depicted in the numerous paintings of Christ, in the midst of His flock, lovingly bearing a lamb in His arms. It is a picture of tender concern, of fatherly care, and of determined oversight against anything that threatens the life of the sheep. It evokes in all of us a longing for a place of peace and security, far from the hostility and unpredictability of what is often the nature of everyday life. Thankfully, we as Christians are promised this same solicitousness from our heavenly Shepherd in every circumstance, good or bad, as long as we live, until we are indeed ushered into that place where no enemies can threaten us any more. Christ keeps watch over us faithfully, here and now.

These characteristics are certainly also the signs of bona fide church leadership, whether it be of a minister, or a lay-leader. Anyone in such a capacity does well to follow their Lord's example here in every respect. But today I want to examine the qualities of the Good Shepherd as they pertain to human relationships at large. We will find much of personal value here.

Note first the element of self-sacrifice: *I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.* Jesus doesn't say, "I give some of my time, when I feel like it, or, after I've satisfied my own needs first." The giving is total: *my life*. Am I willing to give *my life* to my spouse, or do I satisfy my conscience with something far, far less? Now Jesus is certainly referring in today's Gospel largely to His coming death on the Cross, but it is important --exceedingly so-- to understand that giving one's all to others is a way of life. There is no bargaining here, no conditions: "I'll give you this much if you give me that much." Jesus gave Himself fully and completely in every conceivable way long before He surrendered Himself to crucifixion.

Secondly, the good shepherd is contrasted with the *hireling*, the one engaged to work for a salary:

But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep.

The hireling has an ulterior motive in his service to the sheep. He has no personal commitment or interest in them other than what he hopes to earn from his service. He is a man whose interests are divided: his own welfare competes with any loyalty he may feel for the sheep. As soon as the job produces any degree of discomfort, and especially the prospect of danger to himself, he is off like a flash.

I wonder if this isn't a picture of today's great host of failed relationships? When *the wolf* arrives, in the form of financial troubles, or unexpected emotional needs that must be met, or illness, or old age, or sheep that look --shall we say-- more attractive, off runs the hireling, because he or she was always involved for what they could get out of the arrangement. It was a contracted situation with invisible signatures required, instead of one based solely on love and devotion.

Next, is a very singular statement by Christ which will add much to today's discussion: *I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine*. The word "know" speaks certainly of personal knowledge. Earlier in this chapter of St. John we find these words:

Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. 2 But he that entereth in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. 4 And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. 5 And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers.

The issue here is one of trust and familiarity. A man might enter into the midst of the sheep pen with a large sign hung around his neck saying "Shepherd", he might display all sorts of glitz and talent and new fangled ways of leading the sheep, he might put on a very convincing act, but the sheep sense viscerally that he is a phony. They do not *know* him. They do not recognize him. They are not fooled, and they end up doing what is wisest and best under such circumstances: they *flee from him!*

But *knowing goes* deeper than mere acquaintance. Let me make this matter very personal: how well do we *know* each other? I say this especially of spouses. There are a host of things, particularly today, that conspire to prevent this from ever happening at all. Busy lives. Time that is rarely shared and mutually enjoyed. The fear of embarrassment: "If you really knew me --all of my weaknesses and hangups-- you wouldn't like me." A large and elaborate series of defenses we place around our souls so that no one, even those closest to us, can see inside. But the Good Shepherd's sheep have gotten very familiar with their leader, because He hasn't stinted in His devotion to them. He was always there, at every stage of life: when they were born, when they were in grave difficulty, in times of plenty, and of want. The only reason they know Him is because He had both made Himself known to them, and was there to *be* known. It's that simple!

Underlying all of this discussion is the concept of “ownership”. Many things are implied in this idea, some positive, some negative. Ownership of things --property, possessions, etc.-- carries with it the idea of rights: “This is mine. I can do what I like with it.” It is certainly obvious that the Good Shepherd *owned* the sheep He tended. In several places in this chapter, Jesus calls them *My sheep*. But the sort of ownership He describes is one that is very costly *to Him*: it requires His love, and surveillance, defense from false shepherds, and finally, His life. He establishes His personal right to ownership, in other words, at a very great expense to Himself. His ownership never implies subjugation, or domination, or exploitation, as would be the case with those whose relationship with the sheep is merely contractual.

In the same and very real way we also own one another, as spouses, parents, and even as brethren in Christ. But how we handle that ownership will prove whether our relationship to those we own --and I use this word with great care and caution-- is like that of the hireling, who has ulterior motives, or of the Good Shepherd, who *lays down His life for the sheep*. My duty to those I love is certainly to nurture and defend and provide for them. But much harder for me is another duty of equal and perhaps even greater importance: to make myself so completely available to them that they can truly say that they *know* me.

Jesus places a very high priority on this matter of *knowing*. It even describes His own relationship as the Son of God to the Heavenly Father: *As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father...* It is this matter of *knowing* that seems to be the key that brings every relationship into right order: because the sheep are assured that their shepherd *knows* them, they have no fear of His place as master and protector, nor resentment of His authority. Within human associations, our comfort with one another --the trust that we are willing to invest and the dependence we are willing to admit-- are also very much in proportion to the degree that we *know* one another.

Regarding the Last Judgment, Jesus underscores forever that personal relationship --knowledge-- will be our only pass into eternal life:

Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity (Matt. 7:23).

What will we each say of one another about our own earthly relationships, on that day? Did we really *know* one another, in spite of the convincing show of appearances we put on to impress both ourselves and others?

In sum, today’s Gospel brings to the fore concepts that are vital to our own commitments, whether to spouses, or family, or friends, or the church. In the example of the Good Shepherd --self-sacrifice, motive, and personal intimacy-- we have the most practical of models.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.