

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

St. John 10:27-30

The fourth Sunday of Easter is often called “Good Shepherd Sunday.” The image of the shepherd, however, was far more potent in Christ’s time than it is today. With the industrial revolution the farmers and shepherds that were so common to people gave way to factories and industries. But the shepherd is found throughout the Bible. Abel, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Jacob’s sons, and Moses were all shepherds. In fact David, who became King David, was a shepherd. From these the ancient Fathers the image of shepherd was drawn. Many of the ancient peoples used to refer to their gods as shepherds and the Hebrew people themselves beheld God as a shepherd. The most familiar example comes from Psalm 23, “the Lord is my shepherd.”

The reason that the image of shepherd was used is not because shepherds were held in high esteem. In fact, shepherds were amongst the lowliest in society. Their work was lonely and dirty and it meant that they were often excluded from main society. It wasn’t shepherds that were important, it was sheep, because sheep were the main animal offered in sacrifice to God, and they provided meat, milk, fat, wool, skins and horns. We might think of it today like this: gold is important and valuable to us but maybe we don’t think of the the security guards that protect the gold as being as valuable as the gold itself. If there were to be a robbery most would be concerned with how much gold was stolen before they may consider the welfare of the security guards.

The reason that the image of shepherd was used was for its connotations of leadership, of gathering together, of protection. Sheep are notoriously sociable and they tend to follow each other rather than the shepherd, so the shepherd must keep watch on all the sheep, going after those who are stray or finding

those that are lost, protecting them from wolves, giving them shelter in storms, and leading them to pastures where food and water is available. This is because the sheep are valuable to the one who owns them and the owner has entrusted the shepherd with their care and it is he, the shepherd, who is held responsible should any be lost.

That is why the Good Shepherd is Christ. We the sheep of the flock of the Church are inestimably valuable to the Father and the Father has given the care of us to His Son, Jesus. The care that Christ the Shepherd has for us is the same love that the Father has for us and this is why, rather than even one sheep be lost, Christ would sacrifice Himself. And rather than any more sheep be sacrificed, Christ the Shepherd would become the lamb slain, the perfect sacrifice, and the sacrifice to end all sacrifices, "the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." The lives of the sheep, of us, are more important and more valuable to the Shepherd, Christ, than even His own life. Christ said of Himself that He had come to gather "the lost sheep of the House of Israel," who as the "good shepherd" will "lay down His life for the sheep." In the epistle to the Hebrews Christ is called "the great shepherd of the sheep," and St. Peter calls Him "the shepherd and guardian of your souls" and the "chief shepherd."

In the Sacraments we recognise Christ the Shepherd, for it is in Baptism that He has gathered us, and in Penance that He has come after we who have strayed or have become lost. In the Eucharist it is He who finds green pastures for us to feed upon, and in the Anointing of the Sick it is He who carries us on His shoulders.

We must never fail to recognise that we are sheep before Christ the Shepherd. We must trust Him and rely upon Him to watch over us, to protect us, and to carry us back home when we are lost.