



Sunday 21st April 2024

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

Gospel Reading

John 10.11-18

¹¹ ‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.’

Other Readings: Acts 4.5-12

Psalm 23

1 John 3.16-24

Homily

The image of Jesus as our shepherd, is such a familiar one. In Western art, the Good Shepherd is often depicted as a young man carrying a lamb around his shoulders. This imagery frequently appears in stained glass windows, murals, and sculptures found in churches. The portrayal of the Good Shepherd has deep symbolic significance, representing Jesus Christ as the one who lays down his life for his sheep, as described in our Gospel reading today. The image serves as a powerful metaphor pointing to Jesus’ sacrificial love and care for humanity.

In biblical times everyone knew a shepherd. It would have been a very familiar and helpful metaphor too for many early followers of Jesus, and they would have been familiar with describing the promised messiah as a caring and skilful shepherd. The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel all use such language and Psalm 23 is likely the best-known reference to God as a shepherd, with the “rod and staff” bringing to mind the dangers of the terrain - the rod for fending off wolves and lions, and the staff for rescuing sheep trapped in thickets or crevasses.

The image of Jesus as our shepherd can still be a helpful metaphor for us even though shepherds are less common in our communities and some of us may have never encountered a shepherd before.

If we go back one verse before the start of today's Gospel, to John 10:10, one of the most well-loved pieces of scripture, it says "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

We learn from this key verse that the goal of the true shepherd's work is to give the sheep abundant life. But what is this "abundant life"? According to John, it's a life of love and intimacy with God. Abundant life is not about mere survival; it's about thriving spiritually, emotionally, and relationally. It's a life infused with God's love, purpose, and grace. To give the sheep this vibrant fullness of life, Jesus is willing to lay down his own. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Jesus repeats the phrase 'lay down my life' five times during this discourse about being the Good Shepherd. Clearly, that makes this point of particular significance in this context as he prepares his disciples for his imminent death. It is a phrase which is also important for us to hear in terms of laying down our lives and taking them up again.

For us, laying down our lives may not mean death, but it does mean taking risks, living with uncertainty, becoming involved, using time and energy for the sake of others. It is the life that we are called to as Christians. It is not a job or an onerous task to be completed in a certain time. It is an everyday, all day, lifetime thing. It is the call of God, to make this world a better place for all of God's people.

Nothing is more important to the shepherd than the abundant life of the sheep – not even the shepherd's own life. There's no joy for the shepherd that doesn't involve abundant life for the sheep. Here we get to the heart of what God wants for us: abundant life. There are no conditions here, no bargain: simply the offer of life in all its fullness.

Today, often called Good Shepherd Sunday, we are reminded that we are blessed to have a shepherd, who is good and loving and faithful, who promises to lead us all the days of our life, through the trials and tribulations and whatever this world throws at us.

May we all focus our attention on the qualities needed to be good shepherds in our communities and the world today. May we be empowered in the way we shepherd those in our care; and may it renew our wonder at the good shepherd who himself became a lamb, and whose goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our life, that we might share green pastures and dwell in God's house forever. Amen

Conversation Questions

1. What are some of the qualities of a good shepherd?
2. How can you show these qualities to those you encounter?
3. Is there anything else from the passage not already discussed that speaks to you?
What is it?
4. What will you do this week in your Monday-to-Saturday ministry in response to what you have heard today? #everydayfaith

Prayer

Spend some time in prayer, responding to what you have heard today and listening to what God might be saying to you.

Collect of the day

Almighty God,
whose Son Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life:
raise us, who trust in him,
from the death of sin to the life of righteousness,
that we may seek those things which are above,
where he reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

(or)

Risen Christ,
faithful shepherd of your Father's sheep:
teach us to hear your voice
and to follow your command,
that all your people may be gathered into one flock,
to the glory of God the Father.

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