

# 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, year B

Biblical Reflections on the Readings:

Acts of the Apostles 4:8-12

1 John 3:1-2

Gospel of John 10:11-18

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*'I am the good shepherd.'*

A teacher's role is to guide others from the unknown to the known. Jesus was a brilliant teacher. His listeners would all have been familiar with the unique relationship which existed between a shepherd and his sheep.

A good shepherd in Our Lord's time knew every one of his sheep by name, and their individual natures. It was somewhat like the way we know the nature of our pet Dog or Cat and in turn how they know our voices and show affection when they see us. However, Shepherds in Gospel times will stand with their sheep all day in the scorching heat, and at night they will sleep across the entrance to the cave to ensure their safety.

Notice in the Gospels, we hear that the Shepherd leads his sheep ... he never drives them. He simply walks ahead, and they listen to his voice, and follow him wherever he goes. On the other hand, goats must be driven ... they won't follow their goatherd. It's interesting to hear Jesus using the shepherd separating the sheep from the goats to describe the final judgment. In other words, separating those who followed, from those who needed to be driven. Worth thinking about!

Let's now look at today's Gospel Passage under the magnifying glass, so that we can know and appreciate the deeper meanings in this passage. We need to get a handle on the experience and its profound and extraordinary meaning with its impact, as it did for the Greek audience which heard this astonishing relationship between the Shepherd and the flock – the flock to the Shepherd, and the two-way affiliation between the Shepherd and the Father.

The statement from Jesus in today's Gospel, must be seen within the context of its original listeners to the dramatic declaration of Jesus claiming to be the Good Shepherd. OK, let's go deep sea diving into the Scripture passage.

John's Gospel is presented to his Greek audience as a Drama, it has long speeches, engaging conversations and is strewn with specific words and meanings which literally have the power to stun its listeners and readers. The Fourth Gospel has many plays on words which unfortunately in the English we can miss some of the deeper consequences of what is being said. If we were Greeks, listening to this Gospel, we would be gobsmacked, shaken, and deeply stirred within. Let's try and recover as much of this as we can for our purposes right now.

The Gospel of John is divided up into two Books: The Book of Signs and the Book of Glory. This passage comes from the first Book, the Book of Signs. We must keep this in mind as we reflectively read, ponder, and pray from this extract.

Imagine, Jesus making a speech in an auditorium; all eyes are on him, the air is electric with expectation.... then Jesus says, *'I am the good shepherd.....'* that phrase alone, would be enough to stun the listeners.... why? In saying that Jesus is the **I am**, he is saying the sacred word, the sacred name of the Lord God of the Old Testament! The **I am who am**, of the Book of Exodus, Chapter three. The sacred name, which is never said, and the extraordinary reverence for that name, caused our ancestors in faith to call God, Adonai, or Lord. Here Jesus goes right to the heart and proclaims that he is the **I am** without any excuses for using the Divine name. So, having been knocked back in their seats as we hear the opening phrase of this speech by Jesus, let's note that he is THE SIGN par excellence; the first word would have just spellbound the audience! In this passage, Jesus uses the **I AM** twice, and in both instances a different element within the personality of God is presented and acted out by Jesus. The first **I AM** is all about the extreme love and care of the shepherd for his sheep. It also calls us to realise again, the jealous love that the shepherd has for the sheep and the life-threatening lengths that the shepherd will go to protect and love his sheep.

The second time that Jesus uses the **I AM**, the implications are all about knowing the sheep, knowing the Father, and the Father knowing Jesus. The verb to know in English is used in so many ways that its meaning is only found within a context. Not so in Greek! In English, we might say, *'Oh yes, I know those people in house number 24 in our street'*. But the so-called knowing might only be based on the frequent, *'Good morning'* as we walk our dog, or a wave as we drive by. Or we might say to our friends....*'Yes, I know exactly what you are saying.'* That is a bit closer to the Greek meaning.... there seems to be more depth to this knowing than just a simple, 'Hello' or the occasional wave as we drive by. In Greek, the verb TO KNOW is specific in its meaning. In short, it means the deepest form of connection with someone else. It's somewhat like a husband knowing his wife! Intimately and holistically; a union of oneness!

So, when Jesus uses the second, I AM in the passage today, it is all about the intimacy of the Father, Son, and sheep (us). We are precious in the Lord's sight, mind, and ultimate pastoral love. So much so, that in this relationship between the Lord and the Sheep, laying down one's life through the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus is taken for granted. Then we see that the Intimate relationship between God and Israel, is not selective, it is totally inclusive of all, if they wish to be part of the fold.

So, we can rightly ask ourselves what is the underpinning foundation for this unique relationship? The short answer is LOVE, in its fullest and extended meaning as we see drawn out all through the Old Testament, and then its culmination within the Word becoming one of us in all things but sin, and the new life and fresh breath that the Lord breathes into us as was his own resuscitation by the Father at the moment of Resurrection. That 'breath' that inner vigour and intimate understanding of the love-like relationship between the Father and Son is freely given to us and is available for all humanity. We can't just read this passage as though we are reading the Sunday Newspaper; no, we ought to read this passage very slowly so that its impact stirs our whole being like it would have, for the first writers and listeners to this Johannine Good News. Then we need to ponder, and ruminate its salient points, then we need to let go, and let the prayer pray in us, without seeking control of it..... that is a big ask! But it can be real prayer, which give depth to the relationship which God has initiated with us.

One of the great scandals in history is the extent to which the Body of Christ has been so splintered. While several groups claim Christ as their shepherd, many deny the same right to those who do not walk in their way. But there is hope in the words of Jesus in today's Gospel, where He declares that someday, there will be one-fold and one shepherd. But this can happen only when we stress the need for unity... not necessarily conformity. What Jesus is saying is that we must listen and be open to others - Christians and non-Christians - just as we would welcome a guest in our home. There has always been a feeling by many Christian-Catholics over the centuries, that we are the best, and we are the only REAL church, and all the others are good people, but secretly, not as good as us! Or when it comes to 'changes' in seeing our global village we vehemently resist and believe that our Religion is in solid concrete and no need for changes cultural adaptations.... well, that kind of thinking is arrogant and far from the spirituality of Jesus which call us to be '*gentle and humble of heart.*' The breath of the Holy Spirit continues to embrace all in its way, but in order to listen to the spirit, we must be 'open' to the signs of the times and the responses which are urged within us to be Christ's living body today. Yesterday has gone! Today is now! Let tomorrow be a time of surprises, a time of seeing the saving hand of God at work in us, in the people around us, and in this MISSION entrusted to us.

In our Eucharistic Celebration this weekend, we pray that we may devote time to being attentive to the voice of our Good Shepherd, Christ the Lord, in prayer, through unexpected people and events ... that we may put into action the stirrings of response from the Holy Spirit to be Christ's living Word now and always.

*Let us give thanks to the Lord for He is good, for His love has no end.*

