



The Inclusive Community

Fourth Sunday of Easter

April 25, 2010

Good Shepherd Sunday

John 10: 22-30

Homily of Rev. Dr. Anthony T. Padovano

Few images touch the human heart more tenderly than that of shepherd and sheep. The image is deeply woven into the tapestry of human history.

What is it about the relationship of shepherd and sheep which reaches us so deeply? Two images that have a powerful impact on us are: mother and infant; shepherd carrying a sheep. These two images reach us because the infant and the sheep are helpless. Neither can defend itself. The helplessness of the infant gives the mother incredible strength. She will not let the infant be harmed. The helplessness of the sheep leads the shepherd to lay down his life for the sheep.

David, the shepherd king of Israel, tells us that he killed lions and bears with his bare hands when they attacked his father's flocks. I do not know of a bond between human beings and animals where a person so readily and quickly gives his life to protect an animal.

In one of the most beautiful passages in Scripture, Jacob sees his future wife Rachel as she leads sheep to water. Girls were also shepherds. He is so taken with her beauty and her heart that he kisses her. This is the only time he kisses her. This is the only time in the entire Bible when an unmarried man kisses an unmarried woman. He works for Laban for fourteen years so that he can have Rachel as his wife. She is also deeply in love with Jacob. The name Rachel comes from the Hebrew word "Rahel", a ewe or female sheep. Jacob will protect and love Rachel as a shepherd does a sheep. It is an emotional and tender relationship.

Sheep need to be led to grass and water. They look to the shepherd to lead them and they hear the shepherd's voice. Without the shepherd they die of starvation and thirst, as does a human infant without its mother or father.

The Hebrew Bible sees God as the shepherd for our lives. Psalm 28 asks God to carry us forever as the shepherd of our souls. Psalm 23 states clearly "The Lord is my shepherd" and then adds: "I fear no evil."

In the Christian Bible, Jesus tells us he is the shepherd God sent to care for us. He worries about the lost sheep of Israel. He tells us a shepherd will leave 99 sheep to rescue the missing one. Sheep, by the way, stay together and wait if the shepherd leaves them to search for a missing sheep. They do not scatter unless they see the shepherd killed and hear the distress in his voice. Then they scatter, as Jesus tells us, on the eve of his death, like sheep without a shepherd.

The great promise Jesus makes at the Last Supper is that one day there will be one flock, one shepherd.

It is no wonder that the earliest images of Jesus are not of the cross, nor even of Easter, not of miracles or teaching. The earliest image we have of Jesus is carrying a sheep on his shoulders.

In today's Gospel, the adversaries of Jesus ask him: Who are you? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly. Jesus replies: I am a shepherd.

Whenever shepherds meet, they allow their flocks to mingle and mix as they share time together. When it is time for the shepherds to part, they do not go into the flocks to select their sheep. They call their sheep to them. The sheep run to the shepherd and follow.

Jesus says that all his sheep know his voice and trust it. The bond between this shepherd and all who hear his voice is trust, not rigid doctrine or even moral norms. He promises that he will not let a single sheep perish. And that he will give every sheep eternal life, the way a shepherd gives life to sheep by leading them to food and water. In this, he says In today passage, the Father, Yahweh and I, are one. We are shepherds. We will not allow a sheep to be taken by someone who will harm it.

We call the leaders of a Christian community "pastors." Pastor is the Latin word for "shepherd."

GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY

REV. DR. ANTHONY T. PADOVANO

To be a pastor is to be summoned to be trustworthy. We do not understand how a mother could harm her child or how a pastor could hurt a sheep. We see this as the worst form of betrayal.

The human family does not need more Christians in it. It needs more pastors. In Matthew 25, Jesus speaks of eternal life as given to those who were pastors, shepherds, for others: the hungry, the thirsty, the lost, the estranged, the unsheltered, the sick. People like this do not need Christians around them as much as they need pastors. In that passage from Matthew, Jesus says that these are the sheep he will recognize as his own, the sheep he will lead to eternal life, those who spent a lifetime as shepherds.

Nothing is more vital to a marriage than trust. Nothing is more life-giving in parenting than trust. Friendship is just another word for trust. If there is any truth in the Christian community, it is measured by how much trust it makes possible and how little betrayal there is.

A sheep hears a shepherd's voice because it trusts the shepherd. The voice of Christ in any community is a word of life for all those who gather there. Shepherds do not use harsh or hostile language.

"My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me...they will never perish."

We do not trust those who do not know us or who do not know our name or who do not care about us. If all the religions of the world were gone, there would be no loss if the world were filled, in their place, with pastors and shepherds, all of us taking on this role. The true religion is the one that gives us pastors and makes us shepherds. The false religion is the one which gives us hirelings who become predators of the sheep. Such a religion is as far from God and Christ as one can get. For God and Christ are shepherds. If we hear a voice in our lives that calls us to trust and does so in a way we can believe, that voice is the voice of God and Christ and it is there that we belong. The Church will endure not because it is built on a rock but because it is filled with shepherds. It is not Peter or the Twelve who give us the Church but the Good Shepherd.

We are not made for a creed or orthodoxy, but to find a shepherd who will not let us perish. One day there will be one flock and one shepherd. When that happens, we will not need religion anymore. We shall have found paradise and heard directly the voice of God calling our name.