

The Inclusive Community

Fourth Sunday of Easter

May 3, 2009

Homily of Anthony T. Padovano

Jesus the Good Shepherd

John 10:11-18

These few verses in John give us what we might call the CV or resume of Jesus.

Jesus used images constantly to identify himself: light, bread, even a hen gathering her young. In today's Gospel we get the most compelling image Jesus ever gave of himself. It is not the image of the cross. Jesus did not want the cross or to be identified with it. Nor did Christianity which for centuries did not use the cross as its identifying symbol. The catacombs do not have a depiction of the cross. Indeed even Michelangelo painting the Sistine Chapel does not use a cross on that vast canvas. Such an omission would be unthinkable today.

The image of himself that Jesus preferred was the good shepherd. Jesus saw himself not only as a shepherd but a good shepherd. "Good" does not mean competent, being good at what you do, but it means the very ideal of what a shepherd must be.

Perhaps no other image of Jesus touches the human heart so deeply.

There are three qualities in the ideal shepherd image.

- **Love**

The good shepherd loves the flock, each individual and all together; to be such a shepherd is not a task, but a commitment, an act of life and devotion; the good shepherd is not a "hired hand," in the words of Jesus, "who does not care for the sheep."

- **Life**

A good shepherd is ready to give life itself for the sake of the flock; this willingness goes beyond ordinary love; it is built on a sovereign act of freedom by which "I lay down my life for the sheep;" "I do this "of my own accord."

- **Identity**

The good shepherd knows each individual member of the flock; each sheep knows its shepherd; there is reciprocity here; the shepherd knows the sheep and brings it safety; the sheep knows the shepherd and makes the shepherd all the shepherd is.

These qualities make it clear that the central mission of Jesus is to be a good shepherd. One day there must be one flock and one shepherd. This can only come about if the shepherd knows how to address the sheep, not by compulsion or threat but by the love, the life, the identity that make the sheep know they are safe with the shepherd, that they will not be violated.

The shepherd is not an autocrat but someone who senses what each sheep in the flock requires and needs. The sheep feels it is valued by the shepherd.

There is one flock only because there is real love.

Some ecclesiastical administrators twist this text to read that one flock means one true church and that all must be compelled to join it or they will lose their salvation. This is a distortion of everything a good shepherd is. Such a view brings savagery and fear into the role of the shepherd.

The sheep recognize the shepherd because the shepherd has shown love, risked life, identified with the sheep through and through.

The sheep “listen to my voice,” not because it thunders and threatens but because the voice of the shepherd brings comfort and peace.

Is this not what everyone sees in Jesus of Nazareth? Is not a church built on this, the only true church there is?