

4th Sunday of Easter (A)
(Acts 2:14.36-41 /John 10:1-10)
03.05.2020

After three Sundays in which we have listened to stories of Appearances of the Risen Lord to His disciples, on this Fourth Sunday of Easter we are invited to contemplate the Risen Christ in the light of the Good Shepherd Discourse of St John's Gospel. It should be said that the depiction of Christ as the Good Shepherd is the very first image we know to have been employed in the early Christian era to give, as it were, a visage to the Risen Lord. We find it used initially in the Roman Catacomb of Priscilla. Most often, these early depictions of the Risen Christ as Good Shepherd – be that in wall drawings, or, slightly later, in statuettes – show Him to be carrying a sheep on His shoulders. This portrayal evokes for us Luke's parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15). It speaks to us of the Lord's tender mercy in regard to the lost. It has us think of the Risen Christ's intimate connection with, and loving care for, each one of us as individual members of His flock.

The whole of chapter 10 of John's Gospel – both the extract we read this morning and the wider context from which it is taken – underlines for us the lengths to which Christ is prepared to go to show His love for all those who belong to Him. In the section read this morning Jesus says of Himself: *I am the gate of the sheepfold*. Jesus' self-description as *the gate* might not make immediate sense to many of us. We need to understand what lies behind this statement if we are to fully grasp the significance of Jesus' words. When we think of gates we think of barriers (often foreboding barriers at that): gates which keep people locked in – often in places where they would rather not be enclosed; or locked out – excluded from a space into which they might like to enter. When I read the word *gate* by which Jesus describes Himself in today's Gospel passage and wondered what way most people would hear it. Perhaps I was simply distracted at that moment, but I immediately found myself recalling that a 2001 Review of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prison and Probation Services was entitled *Through the Prison Gate*. I further remembered that I had heard it said of a person whose outer appearance looked severe that their face resembled a prison gate. In light of this, it struck me how for some people to hear Jesus say of Himself *I am the gate* could seem rather strange. The image is somewhat baffling if we don't situate it in the context in which Christ spoke. In biblical times, nomadic shepherds led their flocks to safety at night by having them lie down in natural enclosures – most often these would have been natural boxed-in areas, created either by brush (clumps of bushes) or by rocks (circles of stone). Once the shepherd had gathered the sheep safely into such a semi-enclosed area, he would then have posted himself at the opening of this natural sheep-pen to sleep there. Literally, he would have become a *gate* to the sheepfold. With his body the shepherd sought to protect the sheep from marauding wild animals or from prowling bands of robbers – invaders who would readily steal and/or slaughter the sheep. This means that when Jesus said to His listeners *I am the gate* what they would have heard Him saying to them was that He was their protector and that He was ready to lay down His life for them (and for all the members of His flock); that He was ready to sacrifice Himself for them and to do whatever would be needed to keep them secure. What we are called to hear is that Christ was ready to give His life for us; indeed, to lose His life to save our lives. The meaning of Jesus' words *I am the gate* become even clearer when we read what He went on to say a little further into His Good Shepherd Discourse: *I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. A hired man will run when he sees a wolf coming and will leave the sheep, for they aren't his and he isn't their shepherd. And so the wolf leaps on them and scatters the flock. The hired man runs for he is a hired and has no real concern for the sheep*. By those words Jesus assured His listeners that He held genuine concern for them in His heart. Those words that

Jesus spoke in John 10 are addressed to us today. Jesus is telling us this morning that He holds genuine concern for us in His heart. He is reminding us of His real connection with each one of us and our real connection with Him. *We are the sheep of His pasture, the flock that is led by His hand.* The Lord wants to tend to us; He wants to care for us; He wants to lead us to rich pastureland where we may graze. He wants to feed us and nourish our lives. He does this for us in a privileged way in and through the Eucharist, of course, but He does this in so many other ways as well – not least through the loving relationships which sustain and nourish our lives both emotionally and spiritually. Christ is for us what the real shepherd will be to his flock: He is closely bound to us; He is not someone who prefers to remain one step removed from us. The Lord holds us close to His heart always. He seeks us out we stray from the right path and lose ourselves along the way. When He finds us He welcomes us into His reassuring embrace, He lifts us up, He carries us home in His arms or slung over His shoulder – postures which leave our ear near to His breast so that we may hear His heartbeat and thereby feel comforted by the thought of His love for us.

In the Gospel parable of the Lost Sheep in Luke 15 the point is made that it is Christ's joy to show God's grace toward those who have erred. In that story, the fact that the lost one is found is shown to take away all the pain and anguish that was part of the experience that accompanied their loss – at least, their being having been at a distance for a while. Each one of us is the lost sheep in that parable. The fact that the Shepherd is said to be ready to leave the ninety-nine sheep who have not strayed, to go in search of the one who has wandered demonstrates to us – it certainly wants to underline for us – that no matter how foolish we may have been to have distanced our self from the Lord and no matter how tarnished we may have become by our having strayed off the right path and gone through places whereby we should not have passed, we remain always valuable in the eyes of God; we are ever precious to Christ, our Good Shepherd. That the Shepherd of the flock would stop everything else to search for us in our self-imposed loneliness (rather than just cut His losses and pursue His way, given all the bother that we the strays have causes Him) speaks volumes of Christ's care for us. It says to us that each one of us really matters in God's sight. Nothing any of us do, or fail to do, will ever detract from our worth as persons in the Lord's eyes. He will always esteem us to be precious to Him. His love for us will never fail. Because of God's unfailing love for us, we can rest assured that even when we falter – and inevitably we will – our Good Shepherd Lord will always seek us out and find a way to redeem us.

The assurance in God's love to which we are called is rooted in our belief that Christ laid down His life for us. The thought that anyone would do this for us (and people who truly love us would do such a thing for us!) gives us peace and serenity. It shows us how the Lord can and will use everything in our lives (including even our sins and failures) to bring about our ultimate good... if only we are willing to trust and obey His plan for our life. This is a central point made in Peter's speech heard in today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. It was to members of *the House of Israel* – the very people who had been in part responsible for Jesus' suffering and death – that Peter spoke of what he called *the promise* made to them: the promise of their forgiveness and God's gift of salvation; the promise of new life in the Spirit now available to them, if only they would open their hearts to receive it.

The deeply personal character of the love of the Risen Christ for each sheep of the flock – that is, each one of us – is central to the teaching of this morning's Gospel. If it was brought to our attention in the opening verses of John 10 proclaimed today, it is a theme which is seen to run right through the whole of Jesus' long Good Shepherd Discourse. *The shepherd knows each of his sheep by name, and they know him and respond only to his voice.* The point made there is that Jesus knows us through and through (*He knows us better than we know ourselves*, to quote St Augustine); He fathoms the depths of our personality; He is aware of our needs

(He is better aware of our real needs more than we ourselves are aware of them); He is conscious of our feelings (He is conscious even of those emotions within us that we may be too shy to admit to); all our desires are known to Him; we are like an open book before Him. The Lord understands in us all those elements that we cannot understand in ourselves. He sees in us all those longings we are so often loathe to accept as part of our make-up. He also knows all our faults and our failings; He is aware of our past errors and our present sins. Still, with and in all, He loves us through and through!

Finally, the Gospel text heard this morning speaks to us of how the Lord calls out to us, wanting to lead us in the way that is best for us. We are invited to understand and to believe – and actually consent to the fact – that the Lord comes to us this morning to set us free from the pain of our past and to liberate us from our struggles in the present. Given that, like most sheep, we have been, are and still could be foolish in our ways; given that He knows that we won't always find the right path for ourselves, the Lord bids us to trust in Him, to follow His leading, to take the direction He indicates to us. The Risen Christ invites us to listen and respond to His guiding voice today and for the days ahead.

For those moments that lie before us when we may find that we are neither courageous nor wise enough to put one foot in front of the other in a proper manner, that very first image of the Risen Christ as the Good Shepherd that the early Christians had recourse to for themselves, and represented for others to contemplate in the Catacomb of Priscilla, invites us to allow ourselves to be lifted up into the arms of our loving Lord, to be carried safely through the dark valleys and hazardous passages we may yet be called to traverse.

Words from a hymn we sing here at the abbey in our repertoire of chants came to my mind when I read the text we have considered together this morning. Let me end this reflection by presenting these words as a prayer we could all make in faith and hope on this day in which we are called to celebrate Christ, the Good Shepherd:

Loving Shepherd of the sheep, keep your lamb in safety keep;

Loving Shepherd ever near, teach your lamb your voice to hear.

Where you lead, I would go, walking in your steps below.

Till before the Father's throne

I shall know as I am known.