

4th Sunday of Easter  
(Acts 4:8-12 / John 10:11-18)  
25.04.2021

At the heart of today's Gospel passage we hear Jesus say: *I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me.* Let us ponder those words for a moment. I believe they have something important to say to all of us who seek to live as sheep of Christ's flock.

It is surely consoling for us to recall that the Lord knows each one of us by our name. We are given this assurance at the very beginning of John 10. Our Shepherd-Lord knows us and calls us personally. He is aware of and respectful in regard to our unique identity. Our Shepherd-Lord wants that we know Him in a deeply personal way, in our turn, so that we are able to discern and respond only to His voice. I think of Jesus' statement: *I know my sheep and they know me. They recognise my voice.*

Jesus knows and loves the unique person each one of us is. *He knows us better than we know ourselves*, as St Augustine reminds us. Christ is aware of and respectful of our personality, our needs, our sentiments, our feelings, our thoughts, our desires. He knows things about us that we have yet to discover about ourselves. He knows us with our faults and our failings. He knows even our hidden sins. And, with all that, He still loves us. Indeed, with all that, He loves us all the more!

The text we read this morning goes on to assure us that as our Good Shepherd, Jesus *calls us out and leads us* in the way that is best for us. It befalls us to allow ourselves to be led by Christ. We are called to respond to the guiding voice of Jesus, whom St Peter refers to as *the Shepherd and Guardian of our lives.*

That we are known by Christ is such a blessing! This is the first thing I would want to say this morning.

We all have an innate desire (indeed, I dare to say, a vital need) to be *known*. This is because we have an innate desire (again, I dare to say, a vital need) to be *loved*. The terms *to be known* and *to be loved* are synonyms in biblical thought – certainly, this is the case when it comes to what we call the Johannine writings: the Fourth Gospel and John's Epistles.

I would contend that as long as we are not known by another... known for the person we truly are, we will struggle to appreciate (or even just to accept) ourselves. I am convinced that it is by daring to make ourselves known to another (to a trusted person/trusted persons) that we are led to the point where we can humbly welcome, know and love our true self. It is my opinion it is only through growth in the knowledge and love of our true self that we will ever come to be reconciled in the depths of our being. Once we are thus reconciled, I am confident that we will find that we are enabled to live in real freedom of mind and heart; and, as a result, in a better adjusted relationship with our self and better adjusted relationships with others. Stemming from this, we will then become a more united flock. (The section from John 10 we read this morning insists upon the flock's unity.)

Given what I have said so far, it is surely fundamental to our well-being that we strive to know our true self. I wonder if we can say that we do.

There are many people in today's world who struggle to love and accept themselves as they are, because they fail to know themselves as they are.

Since to be known and welcomed by another/by others is so important for our growth as human beings, I suggest that we ask ourselves in all honesty whether or not we really want to be known by another/by others. I fear many of us may be shy in this respect... to our detriment! We do ourselves no favour by going into hiding. That was what Adam did. The

Lord saw that it was not good for Adam to have gone into hiding and so He called him in the garden: *Adam, where are you?* The Lord God bade Adam to come before Him and to present himself just as he was.

Like Adam, we are bidden to present ourselves to the Lord just as we are.

Many of the great spiritual teachers – among them our own Benedict and a woman we (as Olivetan Benedictine monks) could call, our own St Catherine of Siena – insist upon the importance of *self-knowledge*.

St Benedict, in line with the Desert Fathers, strongly emphasises in his Rule for Monks how it is fundamental for every monk who wants to grow in the love and knowledge of God that *he reveal the secret thoughts and intentions of his heart – including his struggles and his sins – to his abbot and/or other spiritual fathers in community*. The monk must show himself to the spiritual father as he is, without fear and without pretence. The spiritual father's mission is to help the one confided to his pastoral care to grow to their full stature in Christ.

What St Benedict asks of the monk must be properly understood. The monk's *self-revelation* is not to give his abbot or a spiritual father an unhealthy hold or control over his life, but simply so that all the elements of the monk's story that the abbot needs to be aware of are shared with him... in view to the abbot being better able to encourage the monk to develop to his full potential.

If the spiritual tradition stresses the importance of *self-knowledge* in the way it does, this is also because it sees *true knowledge of God* to depend upon it.

In St Catherine of Siena's life the thought that self-knowledge leads to the knowledge of God is brought to the fore in a question which we are told she heard Jesus put to her one day: *Do you know, daughter, who you are and who I am?* The Lord went on to say to Catherine: *If you know these two things you have beatitude in your grasp*. Elsewhere in Catherine's Dialogue we read: *Here is the way, if you would come to perfect knowledge and enjoyment of me and eternal life: Never leave the knowledge of yourself. Then, put down as you are in the valley of humility, you will know me in yourself, and from this knowledge you will draw all that you need*.

The themes of *knowledge of God* and *self-knowledge* go hand in hand for Catherine. They are seen to run throughout her writings: her Dialogue, her Prayers and her Letters.

As Olivetan Benedictine monks we recall how Catherine wrote to some of her spiritual sons at Monte Oliveto Maggiore (our Italian Mother-House) to which she had directed them. In her letters to these young Olivetan monks, she encouraged them to live where she believed self-knowledge to grow best: in their monastic cell. (Long before Catherine of Siena did so, a Desert Father had encouraged a disciple to stay in his cell, saying to him that his cell would teach him everything.) The *cell* of which Catherine spoke was not just the four walls of a monk's room, but the place of his heart, the sanctuary in which God dwells and where He awaits that we connect with Him.

For Catherine of Siena *self-knowledge is the foundation of prayer*. So much so that she would say that in a certain sense, *self-knowledge is prayer*.

For Catherine self-knowledge is also an expression of what should be the Christian's basic attitude before God, their stance in life. For, let's face it, self-knowledge keeps a person grounded in humility, does it not?

Sr Mary O'Driscoll, OP, would say that *the interconnectedness between knowledge of God and knowledge of self is so great in Catherine's teaching that one can speak of one knowledge rather than of two*.

Clearly, if on the path of self-knowledge, being known by another is important, it is above all, being known by the One whom we call *the Great Other*, the Lord Himself, that is absolutely vital.

Those who realise that they are known by the Lord (remembering that being *known* by the Lord means being *loved* by Him!) find that they are able to be in-touch with their true self. They are unafraid of accepting who and what they are; how they think and how they feel deep within themselves. They are able to live with the many stirrings that arise from deep within them and work upon their hearts.

Stemming from this, such persons will also feel able to reveal themselves to others. They will know that it is the Lord's way to bring people into our lives whom they can trust – pastors and spiritual guides, faith companions... men and women who can help us grow in the love and knowledge of God.

Moreover, those who reveal themselves to trusted guides will realise that these people are able to guide them because they know themselves. It is only a person who is in-touch with him or her self who will ever manage to lead another to self-knowledge and who also reveal the Lord to them.

I would say that it is only those who know themselves who are able to make the divine known to others.

I have hinted at the fact that the Lord delights to send people our way who reveal to us who He is and who we are. Having said that, let me state that we are called to be such people in our turn.

Each one of us is meant to reveal God to others in a manner that helps them appreciate themselves to be inhabited by God's own life.

At this point let me say a word about the notion of *revelation* which is so important in Christian theology and spirituality.

Each time the word *revelation* is used in Christian discourse it introduces the idea of light being brought forth from darkness. It emphasises how clarity emerges from obscurity thanks to God's intervention. It points to the truth being made manifest.

*Self-revelation* which St Benedict sees as being absolutely in the monk's spiritual life is all about helping the true-self emerge from any unhealthy secrecy in which we may feel inclined to take refuge... false refuge, I hasten to add! All recourse to a false refuge will hold a person a prisoner to their false self.

Honest self-revelation implies the veil being taken away voluntarily, the mask of pretence falling... so that the true self may be set free within us, thus enabling us to live our lives as men and women who are fully alive in Christ.

Again and again the Gospels will make the point that whatever is asked of us is to be engaged in voluntarily. Like Jesus who *freely chose reveal Himself to the world* – daring to appear exposed in His nakedness upon the cross for all to see, so that they might recognise just how far God was ready to go to manifest His love for humanity, so we are called to freely choose to appear before others as we truly are: in our poverty and nakedness.

Likewise, in the same manner as Jesus freely chose to do God's will day after day, so we are called to freely choose to do God's will each and every day.

Finally, just as Jesus freely chose to lay down His life, so we are called to lay down our lives of our own free will, without anyone having to take our life from us.

That Jesus lived all that He lived for us in freedom of mind and heart is insisted upon over and over again in all the Gospel accounts, but perhaps especially in that of John. We find it in the Good Shepherd Discourse from which this morning's Gospel text is taken.

In the passage from John's Gospel proclaimed this morning, it seems to me that our attention is drawn to the fact that a willingness to lay down one's life for the flock should be the sign of anyone established in pastoral ministry by Christ-Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the Supreme Pastor.

The text opened with the words: *Jesus said: I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd is one who lays down his life for his sheep.* Further on we heard Him state: *I lay down my life for my sheep.* Later on again: *The Father loves me because I lay down my life... No one takes it from me; I lay it down of my own free will (...) it is in my power to lay it down.*

It is to this that we are called today. All of us! Not least among our number and throughout the Church those who hold a pastoral office or exercise a pastoral ministry.

Bearing this in mind, let us pray today – Vocations Sunday – that we may be given *shepherds according to God's own heart* for the life and well-being of the Church Universal; our own local Church here in the Diocese of Dromore and all the Churches.

Amen!