

Sunday Homily

4th SUNDAY OF EASTER

3 MAY 2020

YEAR A

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK IV

"The sheep follow because they know his voice."

Illustration

A priest in a rural parish had spent a glorious summer's morning on a local farm, after having been invited by the farmer to assist in gathering the sheep from the fell top. Until then his encounters with sheep had been limited mainly to rescuing the occasional errant lamb that found itself stuck in one of the fences near the church while reaching for the grass on the other side. But the morning's work had gone well: he had not sent the sheep the wrong way or lost any – or even lost himself on the fell.

Later that week he assisted the farmer in feeding the sheep. These pastoral experiences gave him a glow of inward satisfaction and he resolved that he would bring them into his homily at Mass the following Sunday. But when Sunday arrived, the rain was lashing down and the roads to the church were flooded. The congregation was consequently reduced to a handful and so he debated with himself as to whether, because of the small number of people, he should deliver the full homily or give only a brief summary.

He opted for the full homily – but then sensed that it hadn't gone down too well. Afterwards he said to the farmer, "Well, I thought of saying just a few words and then I thought of you feeding the sheep. If only a few come, you still feed them, don't you?" "That's as may be," replied the farmer. "But I don't give them the full bag of feed, do I?"

Gospel Teaching

The farmer, like any good shepherd, knew that to give his sheep too much was as bad as giving them too little. In the Old Testament the relationship of God with the people of Israel is compared to that between a shepherd and his sheep. Isaiah says that God is like "a shepherd feeding his flock, gathering lambs in his arms"; God says to Ezekiel, "I myself will pasture my sheep... I shall be a true shepherd to them."

The concept of God as shepherd is fulfilled in Jesus, who calls his sheep individually by name. The sheep follow him because they know his voice. He is also the "gate of the sheepfold" as through him the sheep are sure of finding pasture. It is through Christ that the people of God, called by name and responding to his voice, enter into the pastures of eternal life.

In the Roman catacombs there are numerous Christian symbols: the peacock representing immortality; the dove signifying reconciliation and peace; the fish as a sign of Christ. But the most frequently used image is that of the Good Shepherd. A beautiful wall fresco in the Catacomb of Domitilla shows a figure of a young Christ in a woodland glade with trees on either side of him. On his shoulders he carries a lamb, clasping its legs with his right hand; in his left hand he holds a staff. Two sheep gaze up at him; two feed near his feet.

On a Christian tombstone in the same catacomb is a similar pastoral image. A shepherd sits underneath a tree; in his left hand he holds a shepherd's crook, in his right he holds panpipes. A reclining sheep gazes up at him. This image is different in that it was pagan in origin, but the early Christians understood that, pagan or Christian, a shepherd has a unique relationship with his sheep. The pagan image became that of Christ, the shepherd in whom the sheep find pasture beneath the tree of life – the wood of the cross.

Application

Just as these early disciples gave a Christian meaning to a pagan symbol, so pagan festivals were superseded by Christian feasts, as in the case of Christmas and Easter. In the present age it sometimes seems that a reversal is in process and that the meaning of a Christian celebration is taken over by a kind of paganism that elevates secular things almost to the status of "gods".

What should be our response? As Christians, we are called to participate in the work of the Good Shepherd. We are called to have nothing of the "false shepherd" about us, and therefore nothing that prevents us from having at least something of that Spirit-filled courage that enabled Peter to stand up before the crowd and proclaim Jesus as Lord and Christ. Like the farmer who fed his sheep neither too much nor too little, we are to present our faith to others with integrity.