

4TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

This familiar, two-thousand-year-old Good Shepherd gospel has a distinctively modern challenge. To catch its impact, we must move our minds back to the shepherding days and the shepherding ways of the Bible. Most people, of course, are familiar with the twenty-third psalm, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. He leads me in green pastures....and even though I walk in the valley of death, I will not fear; the Lord is at my side.” Even city folk like ourselves can feel the comfort and power of that image.

In Luke’s gospel we get the story of the lost sheep and the shepherd who leaves ninety-nine safe ones to seek out the lost one. Not only every shepherd but every common-sensed person knows what a foolish thing that is to do: to leave ninety-nine exposed to danger to rescue one lamb who would be quickly replaced anyway. But it’s that very foolishness, the very unthinking passion of God, that is the point of the story. God’s ways are not our ways, the psalmist reminds us.

Then Jesus speaks of himself also as the door to the sheepfold, and the power of that image strikes us when we recall that in Jesus’ day the sheep were kept within a stone wall about as high as your pew, but there was an opening for them to go in and out. There was no door. Instead, at nighttime, the shepherd himself would lie across the entrance and any marauding wolf would have to get by him. And so, literally he would lay down his life for his sheep. Think about that one: Jesus lying across our doorway!

As we dwell on the closeness of the love and care God has for us in treating us as his adopted children, we can well ask ourselves how we are responding to this new and intimate relationship. Is it evident by word and example from our behavior that Christ is the cornerstone of our life or have we kept him at a safe distance? The

word of God always challenges us to declare our stance. Drawing close to Jesus demands truly Christ-like behavior. In accepting us as his adopted children God is calling us to live the life of Jesus, which means that we in our turn must be loving and caring and draw close to those we meet. Sometimes we deceive ourselves by keeping people at arm's length with obligations to nobody.

Today we are invited to examine how great and caring our love for our friends is. The task of every baptized person is to bring to the attention of the community the love that the Father has for us by letting us be called God's children. Caring for one another is shown by discreet acts of kindness, like writing a letter of sympathy, making a phone call, giving an understanding look or an unexpected gift – all of which say, 'I am with you always.' Caring as a good shepherd is a hidden source of sensitive communication. It offers hope to a friend, to continue on the road of life with a tiny flame of confidence in his or her heart. Our invitation through baptism is to have hands to help others, feet to hasten to the poor and needy, eyes to see misery and want, and ears to hear the sighs of our friends in sorrow. In every age Jesus is calling men and women to care diligently for the intimate needs of their brothers and sisters. This is what being a Good Shepherd really means.

This image of Jesus as the shepherd leading his flock forward has prompted the Church to dedicate this Sunday to vocations. We are asked to reflect on the need for shepherds or leaders in the Church of our own day and we are reminded of the need to pray for vocations. A vocation is a call from God to offer oneself for some form of service in the Church. It may be in one's role as a lay person or in

ordination as a priest or a deacon, or in the consecration of one's life as a religious.

The greater recognition of the charisms of baptism and confirmation is one of the most significant fruits of the Second Vatican Council.

Ministry or service in the Church used to be regarded as the preserve of the ordained clergy while the laity were reduced to passive spectators ... called to stand up, to pay up and to shut up. But little by little over the past fifty-six years the awareness has been growing of the gifts of the Spirit which are part of baptism and confirmation, and which entitle all the faithful to an active and responsible participation in the Church's mission.

Pope John Paul II, drawing on the collective wisdom of the 1987 Synod of Bishops, issued a letter on the vocation and mission of the laity. His stated purpose was 'to stir and promote a deeper awareness among all the faithful of the gift and responsibility they share, both as a group and as individuals, in the communion and mission of the Church.'

Christian action is an expression of the divine energy of Christ-life which is bestowed on us in the sacraments.

The Pope's letter expresses it: 'The participation of the lay faithful in the threefold mission of Christ as Priest, Prophet and King finds its source in the anointing of Baptism, its further development in Confirmation and its realization and dynamic sustenance in the Holy Eucharist.' The crisis of vocations in the Church today may well be in the area of recognizing and encouraging the vast potential of the laity.

Yet this greater recognition of the vocation of the laity must not result in underestimating the special vocation to the ministerial priesthood. In his letter to priests for Holy

Thursday, in 1990, Pope John Paul II wrote: ‘The priesthood is not an institution that exists ‘alongside’ the laity, or ‘above’ it. The priesthood of Bishops and Priests, as well as the ministry of Deacons, is ‘for’ the laity.’ Priesthood is a special form of service or ministry for all the Church. It is principally through the sacraments, which are ministered by the ordained priests, that the laity are served with the means to Christian life. Without ordained priests who dedicate their lives to the gospel and to Church ministry, an essential witness in the life of the Church would be missing.

The vocation to religious life also offers an essential witness in the Church. Religious life is a full-scale consecration of life to God’s love and to the service of people according to the model of Jesus’ life in the gospel. The Church would be very much the poorer without the prophetic stance of those who risk all on their faith in God’s love.

In the gospel there are very few specific intentions that Jesus told us to pray for. That makes it even more significant that he did tell us to pray for vocations: ‘The harvest is rich, but the laborers are few, so ask the Lord of the harvest to send laborers to his harvest.’ (Mt 9:37)

In this third millennium of Christianity, our concern for the future of the Church must be real and practical. All of us, baptized-confirmed members of the Church, must be aware of our responsibility to carry the light of Christ into society. We must support and pray for those who generously dedicate their entire careers to being shepherds of the flock, in imitation of Jesus Christ, the Good

Shepherd. And we must pray for the vocations which will ensure the future well-being of the Church.

I delivered this homily on the 4th Sunday of Easter in 2009. It was relevant at that time because it spoke to the crucial need of vocations. It is significantly more relevant today.

Deacon Gerry

