

## JESUS MY SHEPHERD!

Homily for May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2006, the Fourth Sunday of Easter

Acts. 4:8-12; I Jn. 3: 1-2; Jn. 10: 11-18

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It is to illustrate the depth of the caring love of Jesus Christ for each one of us and, our reciprocal obligation to belong entirely to Him, that Jesus used the metaphor of the Shepherd and the sheep. In fact, the metaphor of the sheep and the shepherd is most appropriate to bring out this truth. The most remarkable thing about their relationship is that the sheep and the shepherd never stay apart; they always live together. The shepherd has a profound emotional attachment to the sheep. His concern for the sheep is so great that he spends his time entirely for the sheep and with the sheep. He is ever ready to travel far and wide to find fodder and water for the sheep. He lives for the sheep even at the cost of his own family ties. His sole interest lies in the security and the well-being of his sheep. At night he sleeps across the door of the pen in order that no wolf will be able to snatch the sheep. His anxiety for the sheep is so great that every night he spends at the risk of his own life. He will die that his sheep may live!

Now, the sheep in turn have a deep attachment to the shepherd. Normally they don't stray away an inch from the sight of the shepherd. They always wait for the shepherd's command before making every further move. Until they get a clear instruction they stand still. They trust the shepherd so much that they obey him blindly. They are ready to go anywhere the shepherd would lead them. However much one may try to detach them from him by holding out fascinations, the sheep will never part with him. And the sheep will never change loyalty to any other person. Till the very end of their lives they will stay with the Shepherd. In those times it was usual at nightfall to bring a number of flocks together into one sheepfold, where they would be kept. Then at dawn the shepherds would open the sheepfold and each one would call his sheep which would gather round him and follow him out of pen and he would then lead them to pasture.

The context in which Our Lord used this imagery makes this illustration even more significant. It was that of Our Blessed Lord's restoring sight to a beggar blind from birth. When the cured man testified that Christ was truly the Son of God, the Pharisees excommunicated him from the synagogue. That was a serious matter, for it denied the beggar all the privileges of the commonwealth of the people and made him an object of derision. Hearing of the ban, Our Lord, restless until He found the lost sheep, sought out the condemned man. Meeting him face to face he asked: Have you faith in the Son of man? And the beggar said: "Tell me who he is, sir, that I should put my faith in him". Our Lord then responded as He did to the sinful woman at Jacob's well: "*You have seen Him...indeed it is he who is speaking to you*". The man who was blind then prostrated himself before the Lord in adoration. The Pharisees thought that by excommunicating the beggar from the synagogue they had thereby cut him off from all communication with the Divine. But our Lord told the crowd that though the door of the synagogue was shut, another door opened: "I am the door; any one who comes into the fold through me shall be safe...".

After telling the Pharisees that they were not really teachers, but disinterested people, strangers and hirelings to the sheep, He set himself in contrast to them not only as the Unique Teacher but as something infinitely more. He was not merely giving ideas or laws, He was giving life: "*I have come that men may have life, and may have it in all its fullness*" ( Jn.10:10). Men have existence, but He would give them life, not biological, but Divine life. Nature suggests but cannot give this more abundant life. As the oxygen could not sustain the life of the plant, unless the plant came down to it, so also neither could man share Divine Life unless our Lord *came* down to give it.

Then he added that He gave this life not by His teaching, but by His dying. He was more a savior than a Teacher. This is what is echoed in the open pronouncement of St. Peter in today's first reading: "*Jesus is the stone rejected by you, the builders, which has become the corner stone. There is no salvation through any one else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved*" ( Acts. 4:11-12). And the second reading re-affirms this, saying that by His atoning death we are made children of God!

In today's gospel episode the Lord speaks of the great price at which these green pastures are purchased. He was the Good Shepherd not just because he provided them with economic plenty, but because He would lay down His life for His sheep. Once again the Cross appears under the symbol of the shepherd. By saying: "*I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again. This command I have received from my Father.*" ( Jn. 10: 11, 17, 18) he makes it clear that His death is neither accidental nor unforeseen, but was intended from the very beginning to give Divine Life to one and all. His father loved him, he said, not merely because he laid down His life, for men could become victims of superior forces. If he died without resuming His life, His function would end with His sacrifice; He would then remain merely as a beautiful memory. But the Father's love contemplated more than this. He was also to retrieve His life and to continue to exercise the royal rights. Thus the dispute that began on the miracle of giving sight to the man born blind pointed to His work of giving His life as a ransom for the emancipation of mankind.

Dear brothers and sisters, what really is the Life Jesus, the Good Shepherd gives us by the merits of His death? What is the green pasture on which Jesus wants to feed us? What is the strength restoring "safe waters" to which this divine Shepherd leads us? We can find the answer to these questions in the seventh chapter of St. John's Gospel: "*On the last and greatest day of the feast, Jesus stood up and exclaimed, "Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as scripture says: 'Rivers of living water will flow from within him. He said this in reference to the Spirit that those who came to believe in him were to receive. There was, of course, no Spirit yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified*" ( Jn. 7:37-39). Yes, it is the gift of the Holy Spirit that Jesus refers to as the Life he gives us. It is the fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit which He wants to feed on and fill us with. Just as drinking natural water over and over again is necessary to sustain and grow in the natural life, so also receiving the Holy Spirit- the Living Water—over and over again is necessary to sustain and grow in the Spiritual life, the Divine life we have received in baptism. Because, as long as we live in our wounded humanity, as long as we are exposed to this sin-infected, broken, and materialistic world, there is always the possibility of the intensity of the Spirit within us getting exhausted.

Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, let us join the entire Catholic Church and all the believers in Christ Jesus to prepare ourselves for the Great Feast of Pentecost to have an ever greater anointing of the Holy Spirit, the Life in abundance. For that, first of all, we need to listen to Jesus the Good Shepherds voice: "*I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice*". It means we need to learn from Him about the life in the Holy Spirit. Secondly, we need to allow Him to lead us where the green pasture is and water available, that is we need to make use of all the available opportunities the Lord gives us for it. Again, as obedient sheep to its Shepherd we need to obey Jesus' command to wait and pray for the out pouring of the Holy Spirit as the Apostles did at the first Pentecost. And finally, we should desire for the special gifts of the Holy Spirit with the zeal to bring all the stranded away into the fold.

If we fail to strive hard to get thoroughly filled with the Holy Spirit to saturation point, all the redemptive work of the Lord will be wasted in us .Can there be any act of greater ingratitude than this?

