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Voice of the Good Shepherd

Biblical Reflection for 4th Sunday of Easter C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, APRIL 20, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- As we move away from the day of Christ's resurrection, the Sunday Scripture readings for the Easter Season help to deepen our understanding of what happened to Jesus and to the Church through his triumph over death. On the Second Sunday of Easter, we looked carefully at the wounds of Christ and renewed friendship with him at table in a locked upper room.

The Third Sunday of Easter this year (C) enabled us to peer into the intimate lakeshore scene, leading us through the ruins of denial and despair, and offering us a chance to recommit ourselves to loving Christ as friends.

On this Fourth Sunday of Easter, we encounter the Good Shepherd who is really the beautiful or noble shepherd who knows his flock intimately. "Good Shepherd Sunday" is also the World Day of Prayer for Vocations in the Church. In all three liturgical cycles, the Fourth Sunday of Easter presents a passage from John's Gospel about the Good Shepherd.

In the Old Testament, God himself is represented as the shepherd of his people. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" (Psalm 23:1). "He is our God and we are his people whom he shepherds" (Psalm 95:7). The future Messiah is also described with the image of the shepherd: "Like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, carrying them in his bosom, and leading the ewes with care" (Isaiah 40:11).

In the Bible and the ancient Near East, "shepherd" was also a political title that stressed the obligation of kings to provide for their subjects. The title connoted total concern for and dedication to others. Shepherd and host are both images set against the background of the desert, where the protector of the sheep is also the protector of the desert traveler, offering hospitality and safety from enemies. The rod is a defensive weapon against wild animals, while the staff is a supportive instrument; they symbolize concern and loyalty.

Ideal image

This ideal image of the shepherd finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. He is the "Good Shepherd" who goes in search of the lost sheep; he feels compassion for the people because he sees them "as sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36); he calls his disciples "the little flock" (Luke 12:32). Peter calls Jesus "the shepherd of our souls" (1 Peter 2:25) and the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of him as "the great shepherd of the sheep" (Hebrews 13:20).

Today's Gospel passage (John 10:27-30) highlights two important characteristics of Jesus' role as shepherd. The first has to do with the reciprocal knowledge that the sheep and shepherd have: "My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me." The sheep remained for many years in the company of the shepherd who knew the character of each one and gave them affectionate names. Thus it is with Jesus and his disciples:

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He knows his disciples "by name," intimately. He loves them with a personal love that treats each as if they were the only one who existed for him.

There is also a second aspect of the shepherd's vocation in today's Gospel. The shepherd gives his life to his sheep and for his sheep, and no one can take them out of his hand. Wild animals and thieves were a nightmare and constant threat for the shepherds of Israel. Herein lies the difference between the true shepherd who shepherds the family's flock, and the hired hand who works only for the pay he receives, who does not love, and indeed often hates, the sheep. When the mercenary is confronted with danger, he flees and leaves the sheep at the mercy of the wolf or bandits; the true shepherd courageously faces the danger to save the flock.

The sheep are far more than a responsibility to the Good Shepherd: They are the object of the shepherd's love and concern. Thus, the shepherd's devotion to them is completely unselfish; the Good Shepherd is willing to die for the sheep rather than abandon them. To the hired hand, the sheep are merely a commodity, to be watched over only so they can provide wool and mutton.

Gift from God

Today's Gospel passage presents to us one of the deepest mysteries of the human spirit. Faith, the ability to hear and to follow a call, is a gift to Jesus and a gift to the followers of Jesus. Why are some capable of hearing that leads to faith? Why are some capable of recognizing the Father in the words of Jesus? The only answer presented is that faith is a gift. Our God and his Son are shepherds that care for us and know us and even love us in our stubbornness, deafness and diffidence. Do we really rejoice in hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd?

I cannot help but call to mind the profound teaching on the Good Shepherd that was offered to us by Benedict XVI during the Mass of inauguration of his Petrine Ministry five years ago, on Sunday, April 24, 2005, at the Vatican. In his very first homily as the Successor of Peter, Benedict XVI said: "One of the basic characteristics of a shepherd must be to love the people entrusted to him, even as he loves Christ Whom he serves. 'Feed my sheep,' says Christ to Peter, and now, at this moment, He says it to me as well. Feeding means loving, and loving also means being ready to suffer. Loving means giving the sheep what is truly good, the nourishment of God's truth, of God's word, the nourishment of His presence, which He gives us in the Blessed Sacrament."

External and internal deserts

The Holy Father continued: "For the Fathers of the Church, the parable of the lost sheep, which the shepherd seeks in the desert, was an image of the mystery of Christ and the Church. The human race -- every one of us -- is the sheep lost in the desert which no longer knows the way. The Son of God will not let this happen; he cannot abandon humanity in so wretched a condition. He leaps to his feet and abandons the glory of heaven, in order to go in search of the sheep and pursue it, all the way to the Cross. He takes it upon his shoulders and carries our humanity; he carries us all -- he is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. [...]"

"The pastor must be inspired by Christ's holy zeal: For him it is not a matter of indifference that so many people are living in the desert. And there are so many kinds of desert. There is the desert of poverty, the desert of hunger and thirst, the desert of abandonment, of loneliness, of destroyed love. There is the desert of God's darkness, the emptiness of souls no longer aware of their dignity or the goal of human life. The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast. Therefore the earth's treasures no longer serve to build God's garden for all to live in, but they have been made to serve the powers of exploitation and destruction. The Church as a whole and all her pastors, like Christ, must set out to lead people out of the desert, towards the place of life, toward friendship with the Son of God, towards the One who gives us life, and life in abundance.

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"Only when we meet the living God in Christ do we know what life is. We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary. There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ. There is nothing more beautiful than to know Him and to speak to others of our friendship with Him. The task of the shepherd -- the task of the fisher of men -- can often seem wearisome. But it is beautiful and wonderful, because it is truly a service to joy, to God's joy which longs to break into the world."

[The readings for the 4th Sunday of Easter are Acts 13:14, 43-52; Revelation 7:9, 14b-17; John 10:27-30]

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Basilian Father Thomas Rosica, chief executive officer of the Salt and Light Catholic Media Foundation and Television Network in Canada, is a consultant to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. He can be reached at: rosica@saltandlighttv.org.

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