

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year B
Lectio divina on Jn 10,11-18

I wonder if today's gospel will arouse in us the same sentiments it aroused in those who were first to hear it. In presenting himself as the Good Shepherd, Jesus must have surprised his listeners and attracted their attention. It is hard for that to happen to us today. His listeners belonged to a people whose most glorious ancestors were shepherds, and the shepherd was an everyday figure among them. When Jesus referred to himself as the typical Good Shepherd it must have seemed to them both exaggerated and exciting. The Shepherd of Israel was God alone, but it was applied, by extension, also to God's legitimate representatives, the kings of the past or the Messiah who was to come. Jesus claimed to be the shepherd of his people – what did he mean by this? What did Jesus' claim suggest to his listeners? To make himself better understood, Jesus contrasted his way of acting to that of hired men who were not true shepherds, though they pretended to be. The way they treated their flock showed that they were wicked.

At that time: Jesus said,¹¹ I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² He who is a hireling and not a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ He flees because he is a hireling and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my Father."

Read: understand what the text is saying, focussing on how it says it.

Chapter 10 of St John's Gospel consists of a debate in two parts between Jesus and the Jews. In the second part which takes place in the Temple (Jn 10, 22-39), the conflict becomes more intense, because Jesus identifies himself with God. Our text belongs to the first part (Jn 10, 1-21) and it is linked to the healing of a blind man (Jn 10,21). There are two references to the listeners' reactions (verse 1 and verse 7) corresponding to the two sections. Both are introduced by the same formula ("Very truly, I tell you"), but in fact they constitute one discourse by Jesus, based on examples taken from the way of life of shepherds, something with which his listeners were very familiar. Every shepherd, whether he was the owner or a hired man, had his own flock and lived with them during the day. Before nightfall, the different flocks were led to a single sheepfold, where the gate was guarded by a watchman. Anyone who wanted to steal the sheep would have to enter the sheepfold by making a hole in the wall or by jumping over it. In the morning, as soon as the sheep heard the shepherd's voice, they left the fold and followed him.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd because he gives his life for his sheep (Jn 10, 11.14). Risking one's life for others means being willing to pay with one's very existence for the safety of the flock. That's what makes one a good shepherd. The beauty and goodness of the shepherd must result from his authenticity which is seen in his willingness to do his duty. The expression "to lay down one's life for someone" is rare in Greek, but it is typical of John (Jn 10, 11.15.17-18; 13,37-38; 15,13; 1 Jn 3,16). The shepherd makes safe the life of the sheep because he lays down his own life for them. By risking his life he proves he is a good shepherd, unlike the hired man who is concerned only about his own wellbeing (Jn 10, 12-13). The owner has dominion over the lives of the sheep that belong to him because he is willing to die for them (Jn10, 12-13.15.18). The image of the Good Shepherd was widely used in the early Christian community (Acts 20, 26-29; 1Pt 2,25; 5,1-2). Christian leaders, like Christ the Good Shepherd, were recognised as such because they were willing to risk their lives to save the lives of others.

As well as giving his life, the Good Shepherd knows his sheep and they know him. This is another criterion by which the true shepherd is recognised. The polemic tone disappears. Jesus stops talking about the bad shepherds but speaks instead about the relationship he has with his flock (Jn 10, 14-16) and with his Father (Jn 10,16-18). It is a relationship of mutual knowledge. The knowledge that makes him a good shepherd is not the result of intellectual capacity nor a particular psychological attitude. It is born, rather, from the comprehension and trust that come from sharing life and ongoing companionship. This mutual knowledge between Shepherd and flock (Jn 10, 14) is nothing other than a reflection of the mutual knowledge between God and the Son who reveals him. Giving his life for others is the fruit of the two-way knowledge that reigns between Jesus and the Father. Here also Jesus is doing what the Father has taught him (Jn 8, 28). Salvation comes from divine intimacy. Real love and the giving of one's life for others can only be born in the intimacy of God who loved the world so much that he gave his own Son to save mankind (Jn 3, 16-18). The Son's self-giving is nourished by the knowledge he has of his Father.

The care that Jesus gives know no limits, neither of space nor time. It is universal and for all time (Jn 10, 16). Jesus cares, not only for the sheep that belong to his fold, but for all who are entrusted to him, and all who listen to him and recognise his voice (Jn 8,47; 18,37), and for all who remain united under his leadership. It is significant that in order to be universal this mission must be linked to the will of the Father to give up his Son (Jn 10, 17). The proof of the Father's love is the voluntary giving up of his own Son. The death of Jesus is not to be seen as an injustice, a catastrophe or a scandal, but as a supreme act of freedom. Christ's personal sacrifice of his life is proof of the Father's love

Handing himself over to death is not for Jesus an inescapable necessity. He does not save us unless he wills to save, and unless we want to be saved. He has power to lay down his life. There are, then, two agents of salvation – the Father's love for the world which is fulfilled in the gift of his Son (Jn 3, 16), and the love of the Son for his Father realized in his consecration for the flock (Jn 10,17). The Son takes on the Father's will in an act of free obedience. Through his obedience he has power to take up his life again. Jesus the Shepherd is, then, in control as he lays down his life freely and takes it up again (Is 53, 10-12). That is his mission (Jn 10, 18). He fulfils it for love of his Father. His death, the giving of his life - and his resurrection, taking it up again – are one inseparable act of salvation (cfr. Jn 12, 24).

Jesus' power, his will to give his life and his ability to take it up again, is in accord with the Father's will. The shepherding of the flock is, therefore, the work of two agents – the Father who loves and the Son who is loved. Both loves are fulfilled in Jesus' gift of his life and in the Father's gift of his Son. Anyone, then, who knows that he is saved by the Son, knows that he is doubly loved. The Father's sending of his Son and the Son's obedience to the Father, give eternal life (cfr. Jn 12, 49-50; 14,31). The death and resurrection of Jesus are presented as 'ordained' by God and are understood as an act of love. The love with which Jesus gave his life and took it up again is not mere human love, but divine love. And the fruit of this love is the salvation of mankind. Very rarely in the New Testament do we find the paschal mystery expressed in such a profound and original way. The consequence is obvious, even though it is not stated here – anyone who lives as a result of Christ's self-giving, must lay down his life for others (Jn 15,13; 1 Jn 3,16).

Meditate: apply what the text says to life

In discussion with the Pharisees, Jesus uses an image familiar to his listeners, that of the shepherd. He identifies himself as the Good Shepherd. His knowledge of the flock is the reason for his goodness. His is not merely speculative knowledge, but experiential, the result of his self-giving and his intimacy with the Father. Anyone who gives his life proves that he is an authentic shepherd of the flock. Anyone who knows God, knows his sheep, those that he has gathered together and that belong to him. The free offering of his life and the knowledge he acquires through living with the sheep are the qualities that characterize the goodness of Jesus the Shepherd. A Christian life which does not enjoy close contact with Jesus or which ignores his closeness, is not authentic. The guidance and presence of the shepherd do not depend on the flock. It is because he is present to us that we enjoy his attention. Therefore, instead of complaining about being neglected, we should ask ourselves if we belong, effectively and affectively, to the flock of Jesus the Good Shepherd.

To Jesus' listeners, the image of the shepherd was highly evocative. We probably have to make an effort to understand it. They knew that having a shepherd meant having, at one and the same time, a guide for the road, a companion, an owner who would spend his life caring for them, and a protector who would help them to find food and rest. Caring for the flock implies undisputed authority and selfless dedication, as well as loving and permanent service. In presenting himself as a shepherd, Jesus was indicating that he was master and servant, guide and companion, willing to develop a relationship with anyone who wanted him as shepherd, as any good shepherd does. He wanted to live with his flock, sharing their fatigue and their rest, food and other necessities, sun and rain, day and night. Moreover, Jesus is saying that he is ready to lose his life rather than lose his flock. What makes him a Good Shepherd is that he prefers living with us to living alone, because he prefers to risk his own life than to risk losing us.

He is not like the hired man who lives off his sheep and abandons them whenever he sees that his own life is in danger. The desire to live with his flock led Jesus to give his life for us. Jesus does not just say that he is the good Shepherd, or promise to become the Good Shepherd one day. He has already paid the price by dying for us. He has proved his goodness, paying the price with his life. How, then, is it that we feel abandoned by him when we face danger or adversity?

If we really believe Jesus when he says he wants to be our Good Shepherd, what right have we to think we are alone and undefended when we are in difficulty or facing danger? He gave his life for us. He could not have given a better proof that he is always with us. He renounced his own life because he preferred to share life with us. He will not leave us when enemies threaten, when we face danger or even death.

Because we have Jesus as our shepherd, we can live our lives without fear, knowing that the present is in good hands, and our future already assured by One who loved his own life less than he loved ours. If we want to have Jesus as our shepherd, we cannot live like those who face the world of today or the future of tomorrow with fear and prejudice. The certainty that he is with us as we go through life, and that he is always there for us when we follow his ways, should free us from any fear or anxiety that the present world or an uncertain future might produce. Our safety is not based on promises yet to be fulfilled but on deeds already accomplished. Christ has freely given his life for us and, for that reason, God has made him shepherd of our lives.

If we, even though we are Christian, do not feel that Jesus is present in our hearts, if we fail to discover his footsteps in our midst, if we are not familiar with his voice nor the demands of his will, if our need for security is beyond what we ourselves can satisfy, if the burdens accumulated over many years of Christian living outweigh the joy of knowing that we have Jesus with us, if we feel more abandoned and less secure, more unhappy than others – does this not mean, perhaps, that we have not really taken Jesus as our shepherd? We need to ask ourselves seriously, in his presence, if we are allowing ourselves to be led by him. Have we not, perhaps, chosen to follow a hired man, who will never give his life for us, whatever he might promise? Could it be that we feel abandoned simply because we are not following the one true Shepherd, that we have not really taken Jesus as our shepherd?

This is what will happen to us, if we continue to follow a shepherd who is not willing to die for us. Jesus himself has said so. If the shepherd is a hired man, the sheep will inevitably become the prey of wolves. This, sadly, is our story. We have often been the victims of others in whom we put our trust, because we lack the courage to put all our trust in Jesus. The only shepherd worthy of our trust is one who is willing to lay down his life rather than risk the lives of his flock. The only one who deserves to be followed is one who prefers living with us to living apart from us. If we do not feel that we are sufficiently cared for by Jesus, it is because we have not allowed Jesus to be our Good Shepherd. He does not want to be any kind of Shepherd other than a Good Shepherd. In him we can place all our hopes, provided we are ready to follow him, whatever it may cost.

The fact that he did not abandon us completely when he returned to his Father, is one more proof of his goodness. He gave us other shepherds who would represent him, until he comes again. Today the universal Church celebrates Christ the Good Shepherd. We pray for all who have heard the call to follow him and to take his place as shepherds. We owe gratitude and love to all who shepherd in his name and with his authority, to the many believers who give their lives to become shepherds like the Good Shepherd. May their generous self-giving help us to understand better the sacrifice of Christ who sent them. In their faithful commitment we can see something of the total self-giving of the one and only Good Shepherd. But we need other shepherds as well. They may not be as good as we would like them to be, but they are the closest image we have in this world of the Good Shepherd whom we all need. Our prayers for

them will make them better, and then we will have good shepherds who remind us more clearly of the face and the voice of the Good Shepherd. We have great need of good guides and so we pray that God may make our shepherds good, the shepherds he has sent us.