

## Fourth Sunday of Easter C - Hearing the Voice of the Good Shepherd

May 8, 2022.

Happy Mother's Day to all mothers, grandmothers, god mothers, mothers to be. You are signs of the motherhood of God in caring for the children in body and spirit that God entrust to you; and for the experience of fraternity that the family can give to the world.

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is also known as **Vocations Sunday** or **Good Shepherd Sunday**, and this year the May 8 **World Day of Prayer for Vocations** falls on this Sunday too. Pope Francis in his message for this 59th World Day of Prayer for Vocations released on May 5 addressing to priests, religious, consecrated women and men, and the lay faithful, encouraged everyone to **"journey and work together in bearing witness to the truth that one great human family united in love is no utopian vision, but the very purpose for which God created us."** The Pope concluded his message with an appeal to the entire Church to work together, inspired by God's love. **"Let us pray, brothers and sisters, that the People of God, amid the dramatic events of history, may increasingly respond to this call,"** the Pope said. **"Let us implore the light of the Holy Spirit, so that all of us may find our proper place and give the very best of ourselves in this great divine plan!"**

The liturgies of the last two Sundays have led us to reflect upon the apostles 'coming to faith in the Risen Lord. As they shared this faith with the first generation of Christians, the image of **Jesus as 'shepherd and guardian 'of God's people** (1 Peter 2:25) established itself in Christian consciousness. One of the Church's first representations of the Saviour portrayed him as a youthful shepherd with a sheep on his shoulders - no doubt indicating that when they heard the parable of the lost sheep, the first Christians instinctively identified the shepherd of the parable with the Risen Lord. The image has a long pre-history. In Old Testament times, the peoples of the Middle East had an old tradition that spoke of a king as 'shepherd 'of his people. Though these ancient rulers were all too often exploiters of their subjects, this remarkable ideal of humble service lived on in the peoples 'traditions. In the outlook of old Israel, something remarkable occurred when this image was associated with the God of the covenant, the champion of the oppressed - who rebuked the nation's rulers through his prophet: **'You have failed to bring back strays or look for the lost ... I myself shall take care of my flock'** (Ezekiel 34). This arresting theme is echoed in the psalms, Israel's confession of faith – in Psalm 100 used in this Sunday's liturgy, and in the familiar Psalm 23: **"The Lord is my shepherd; There is nothing I shall want."**

Against this background, the New Testament passages that speak of Jesus as 'shepherd': **"When the chief shepherd appears, you will be given an unfading crown of glory"** (1 Peter 5:4); **"the God of peace brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep"** (Hebrews 13: 20) take on a new depth of meaning – a meaning that is fully expressed in this Sunday's short gospel reading from John (10:27-30). **'The Father and I are one'**: with these final words of the fourth gospel's long and familiar passage on the 'shepherd 'theme, **Jesus makes it clear that, in his role as 'shepherd', he identifies himself with the Shepherd who is the God of Israel – full expression of the Father's being.** Because he speaks with the fullness of the divine authority, true believers 'listen to his voice'; he is the very Author of 'eternal life', **by celebrating the universal nature of his flock: before the throne of the one who laid down his life for them are gathered 'people from every nation, race, tribe and language'; his 'salvation reaches the ends of the earth'.**

In this Sunday's readings we are also presented several times with the familiar shepherd motif. The text from Revelation (7:9, 14b-17) declares that the **"lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd"** and the gospel reading (John 10:27-30) is about belonging to God, as sheep belong to a shepherd. Perhaps nowhere is this metaphor more poignantly presented than in

**beloved Psalm 23, which assures us that God the shepherd guides, leads and restores us, even in the darkest of times.** The Bible often refers to political and religious leaders as shepherds. In the Old Testament in particular, bad leaders are portrayed as bad shepherds, while God and the future Messiah are described as good shepherds. Furthermore, it is the voice of these shepherds that lets people know their trustworthiness. Jesus tells us that his sheep will listen to and know his voice, not that of the hired hand. Just before today's reading in the book of John, Jesus explains to a group of Pharisees that, **"the sheep follow him [the Good Shepherd] because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers."**

Today it is perhaps harder than ever to distinguish between voices of the good and the bad shepherds, simply due to the large number of loud, public voices competing for our attention and our loyalty. And furthermore, these voices that attempt to shepherd us through confusing paths often contradict one another. It can indeed be quite challenging to discern the voice of a trusted guide out of a mixture of facts, pseudo-facts, speculations, opinions and falsehoods that bombard our ears every day. Some voices employ the tried and true tactic of taking unpleasant or threatening truths and casting them into the realm of doubt or uncertainty. When the jury still seems to be out, we can go with business as usual rather than confronting harsh realities and enacting some changes.

Brothers and sisters, you have probably heard of story called **"Footprints"**. It was written in 1936 by a girl named Mary Stevenson. Mary had lost her mother at age six. She grew up in poverty and hardship as her father struggled to raise eight children during the Great Depression. One cold winter's night when she was 14, she was locked out of the house. As she sat shivering on the doorstep, she wrote "Footprints" on a scrap of paper. Think about young Mary Stevenson struggling to survive, sitting out in the cold, and writing this. And think about what God, the good shepherd, was thinking as he watched over her that night.

*One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord. / Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky. / In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand. / Sometimes there were two sets of footprints, other times there were one set of footprints. / This bothered me because I noticed that during the low periods of my life, when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat, I could see only one set of footprints. / So I said to the Lord, "You promised me Lord, that if I followed you, you would walk with me always. / But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life there have only been one set of footprints in the sand. / Why, when I needed you most, you have not been there for me?" / The Lord replied, "The times when you have seen only one set of footprints in the sand, is when I carried you." It's just a story. But it rings true.*

Brothers and sisters, Christ is our good shepherd. He reminds us in today's Gospel passage, if we trust in him, nothing, not even hardship and suffering, can "take us out of his hand". But we are free to jump out of his hand. Little by little we can drift away from Him. The cares and concerns of everyday life can get to us. We can get tired, and forget why we do what we do. So how should we live out our faith in the Risen Lord? May be we learn from first generation Christians who did so by owning him as their 'Good Shepherd – 'by 'listening to his voice 'as they ponder all that the great truths of faith offered them, and by living in the hope he brought to the world as he 'led them to springs of living water'. Whose voice is so familiar that you trust it unconditionally? And what is that voice telling you? **The Lord is my shepherd; There is nothing I shall want. Beside restful waters He leads me; He refreshes my soul. He guides me in right paths for His name's sake. You spread the table before me in the sight of my foes; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Only goodness and kindness follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for years to come. (Psalm 23) Amen.**