

04/18/21

Misericordia Domini, 2nd Sunday after Easter
Jesus our Good Shepherd

John 10: 11-16

I am the Good Shepherd. The good Shepherd gives His life for the sheep. But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them.

The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep.”

I am the Good Shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep.

And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one Shepherd.

Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Christ Jesus as our Shepherd, staff in hand, tending to and leading His flock while carrying a little lamb in His arms—that beautiful picture is not only one of the Church’s favorite and most beloved images of our Redeemer, it also one of the most meaningful and instructive. It is easily understood, and a small child can gain comfort and assurance from it, while at the same time it is a picture which only becomes more precious to us as we grow older. It was that way also for the people of Jesus’ own day. Shepherds and their special relationship with the sheep of their flocks—that was a part of daily life in Galilee and Judea. In every small town and village, the people were accustomed to and took for granted this remarkable sight, that each morning shepherds would call to their own flocks which were mixed together with the other sheep in the central, communal enclosure. Each sheep would recognize the voice of its own shepherd and would follow him—and only him—out of the village. The sheep knew their own shepherd and trusted him completely, instinctively confident that he would care for them and would lead them to the pastures and the watering holes which they needed to survive.

“I am the good Shepherd,” says Jesus, and He thus invites us to put our trust in Him, to live with the full assurance that He will provide for us, to recognize and to follow His voice in the full confidence that He will care for us in the very best way. Such trust belongs to the resurrection-life which He imparts to us and which we consider in its various aspects during this

Easter-Season. And this trust of ours in Mary's divine Son only grows more firm when we grow in our knowledge of Him and in our recognition of His voice as He calls to us in His word.

I

"I am the good Shepherd," says Jesus, and His hearers that day easily understood that He wanted them to connect Him—Jesus of Nazareth—in their minds to the ways in which the Hebrew Scriptures spoke of the Lord God Himself as the Shepherd of His people. "The Lord is my shepherd," the psalmist David had written, and in our Old-Testament reading for today the God of Israel brings that Psalm to the minds of His people as He says through His prophet Ezekiel, "Indeed, I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out...I will feed them in good pasture and their fold shall be on the mountains of Israel...I will feed My flock, and I will make them lie down..." That is the rock on which our trust is anchored—our Shepherd is the Lord God of Israel Himself, our Creator-and- Redeemer God.

In our text Jesus contrasts Himself with those who cannot be counted on to care for the sheep. They are only hired hands and not the owners of the flock, and therefore they cannot be trusted to protect the sheep against the predators which attack them. They work only because they are paid, and when the wolf comes, they run away to save themselves, leaving the sheep to be scattered. Throughout Israel's history, the Lord's prophets had needed to warn the people against such false shepherds. Also in Jesus' day, the religious leaders of the people for the most part did not have in mind the spiritual good of the flock which had been entrusted to them. The priests and the scribes were mainly concerned to protect their well-paid positions of authority under their Roman overlords. The Pharisees were for the most part concerned that the people should honor them for their diligence in keeping the Law of Moses. Still today, there are too many who claim to be shepherds in Christ's Church but whose main concern is their earthly security or the prestige that comes with their various offices, and who will therefore preach and teach what they think the people want to hear rather than the Word of God and the Gospel of Christ. "Hirelings"—those who work only for pay—that is Jesus' verdict upon them.

"I am the Good Shepherd," says Jesus. It is the incarnate Son of God Himself who calls us to hear His voice and to follow Him. He is the Shepherd whom we can trust.

II

"The good Shepherd gives His life for the sheep," says Jesus. We have just walked through the season of Lent in which we have thought about and meditated on how Mary's Son who is God's Son did just that. The

shepherd's love which moved Him to give Himself for us—that, too, is the rock on which our trust is firmly anchored.

It was for the sake of us straying sheep that Christ Jesus took on Himself that agony in the Garden of Gethsemane—took up our sin as His own, felt the burden of that sin in His own conscience, felt the Father's wrath against that sin as wrath directed against Himself. It was because He cares so deeply for His flock that He gave Himself to be mocked and spat upon and beaten, whipped and crowned with thorns. He knew in advance every detail of that suffering which He would endure. Yet for our sakes—out of His pure, self-giving love for us—He never looked back. He thought only of what His sheep needed. “The good Shepherd gives His life for the sheep,” says our Savior, and there on the hill Golgotha our incarnate Lord did indeed give His life as the atoning sacrifice for our sin, so that we might live. That is the love of our Shepherd, the love of Him who calls us to follow, the love of Him who calls us to put our trust in Him.

In this life, as the Psalmist David said, although we belong by faith to the Good Shepherd's flock, you and I must still walk “through the valley of the shadow of death.” Though we are His sheep, we are still subject to all the evils of this fallen world. Christians, too, endure fires and floods and earthquakes. Also Christ's people of faith are affected by droughts and famines and diseases. Also the sheep of His flock are victims of hate and violence. Indeed, it is often precisely because such evils arise that the hirelings of which Jesus speaks show their true colors and desert the flock.

In this fallen world so full of the consequences of human sin, our Savior bids us to hear His voice, to follow Him, to trust Him. He calls us to believe that He will not abandon us, to believe that He cares for us, to believe that—as our divine Shepherd who has given His life for His sheep—He will, as the Apostle Paul says, make all things work out for our good. That means also the pains and the evils and the sorrows which we encounter in our earthly walk. The cross on Calvary's hill is the indisputable proof that our Shepherd has earned our trust.

III

“I am the Good Shepherd,” says our divine Savior, “...I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father.” The shepherds of Jesus day knew their sheep individually, had pet-names for each of them, understood their quirks and were acquainted with their individual characteristics and wants—which ones preferred to be in the lead and which ones preferred to follow, which ones tended to stray if not kept in line, which ones needed more time to graze than the others. “I know My sheep,” says Jesus, and He compares His knowing the members of

His flock to that intimate and perfect “knowing one another” which is shared by the Son and the Father in the inner life of our Triune God.

“I am known by My own (sheep)...and they will hear My voice,”
Jesus says. In a sermon on this text, Martin Luther called the attention of his congregation there in Wittenberg to the peculiar fact that sheep have sharp hearing. That is why they could recognize the voice of their shepherd. And thus, once again, we are led to consider during this Easter Season that the Resurrection-life to which are called and on which we meditate includes this, that we make use of His Gospel-Word which is given to us, that we know that Word and implant that Word—the voice of our Shepherd—in our hearts.

To read a Gospel or the Psalms in our home-devotions, to review our Catechism with its summaries of the chief parts of Scriptures, to keep fresh in our minds those hymns of Luther which are so filled with the Trinity and with the Person and the atoning work of Christ our Savior—that can perhaps sound to us like a drudgery-filled assignment, a time-consuming task with little appeal for us. But it sounds different—like a labor of love filled with the delight of a personal encounter—when we consider such reading and review simply to be exercises in listening to the voice of our Shepherd.

It is because of His limitless love for us that Christ Jesus—our divine and caring Good Shepherd who has laid down His life for us—now urges us to hear and to know His voice so that we may follow Him, so that we may not be led astray by the hirelings who plague His Church, so that we may be kept safe by Him from the wolves who would otherwise destroy us. Trusting our Shepherd—that is how we live in the light which streams from His empty tomb.

May the Holy Spirit grant this to us for the sake of our Good Shepherd.
Amen.