

Easter II (23 April 2023)

“I am the good shepherd; and know my sheep, and am known of mine, even as the Father knoweth me, and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.”

+In the Name...

I must confess that I am a city boy: the suburbs of the city, but still the city. My knowledge of sheep is pretty much limited to watching Sherri Lewis and her trusty sidekick Lambchop. But I do recognize that this Sunday in Eastertide presents us with one of the great and most familiar images of the Bible: the image of Christ the Good Shepherd. It is a simple concept yet radical in its meaning. One of the reasons given for the decline of Christianity in Western Society (there are many given, as you are no doubt aware), is because of the large number of agricultural references in Holy Scripture: sheep, goats, corn, wine; you get the idea. Contemporary Westerners are

just unable to grasp examples so foreign to their ways of life, the argument goes. I am hesitant to put much stock in that explanation. I am by no farmer, but I find such earthy examples to be made up of relatively easy concepts that can be translated into the language of 21st century, technology-dependent Americans.

Jesus says, “I am the Good Shepherd.” What distinguishes good shepherds from bad is care. The Good Shepherd cares for the sheep. The meaning of that care is that he lays down his life for the sheep. There is sacrifice – the total giving of oneself for the good of another. It is what we have been privileged to see in Holy Week, on the one hand, contemplating the utter failure of ourselves to seek the good in one another and, on the other hand, contemplating the sacrificial love of Christ who alone accomplishes what belongs to our eternal good.

The Good Shepherd, and this is the great and wonderful paradox, is also the Lamb of God. His sacrifice is the cure for our sins

but it also imparts his care for our lives. The pastoral ministry of the Church is rooted in this sense of care which is often called “the cure of souls.” Hence the title “curate”, because he cares for the souls of his flock. It goes beyond the superficial and external matters of comfort and ease and convenience to address the distempers of our souls, the disenchantments of our hearts and the despair of our lives. There is no pastoral care without the naming of the cure and there is no cure without the acknowledgement of our need to be cured in the very root of our being. Once again, it belongs to the pageant of Holy Week to point this out to us. But it also belongs to the parade of Eastertide to show that sacrificial love is a living love. It belongs to the divine life of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, the divine love that has been made visible in the passion and crucifixion of Christ, and in the wonder and triumph of Christ’s resurrection.

Jesus, as today's Collect so marvelously puts it, is "both a sacrifice for sin and also an example of godly life". He is the sacrifice for sin. He is the cure, the Good Shepherd who gives His life for the sheep. He stands in the face of the destroyer of the sheep - ultimately our sins are His destroyer even as our sins diminish and destroy us. He is the shepherd who wills to be struck, not so that the sheep may be scattered, but so that through His being struck and our being scattered, He may gather us to Himself. He gathers us through His care for us. He cares for us by His cure for us.

He lays down His life, not simply because He is the Good Shepherd but because the condition of His being the Good Shepherd, first and foremost, is that He knows His sheep in His knowing and being known of the Father. Everything is drawn into the knowing love of the Trinity. The relation of the Son to the Father establishes the real context for the meaning of Christ the Good Shepherd. He cares

for the sheep because they, we, belong to Him. We are not our own.

We are His and that alters the whole question of care. It has altogether to do with the nature of our humanity as constituted in the image of God. When we look at ourselves existentially and practically, we forget and deny this fact. We deny the very principle of the transcendence of our humanity which gives hope and dignity to our very being even and precisely in and through our suffering and dying.

Because we belong to Him, He cares for us; because He cares for us, He lays down His life for us; “by His stripes we are healed.” He is our cure and He has risen for our justification. His life becomes our life, a life oriented to God through our love and service of one another made possible only in the sacrifice of Christ.

Thus, He is also an example of godly life. “For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow His steps”. It should be our care to

follow in the steps of Him who is our cure. There are things for us to lay hold of actively. What He has done for us in His free-willing sacrifice - justification is His cure for us - becomes the measure of His life in us - sanctification is His care for us. The challenge for us is to act upon it. But more than a constant challenge, it is equally our vocation as belonging to our identity in the body of Christ.

It remains as one of the great images for our age, recalling us to our mission and life in Christ. While engaging the world in all its confusions, He steadfastly refused to compromise the basic doctrines of the faith to accommodate particular agendas and programs. That has been, it seems to me, the North American disease in particular, the demand that the Gospel be reduced to the sensual and the practical. But then it ceases to be the Gospel. Then there is no care, only the kindness that kills.

We meet in the care of the Good Shepherd. His Word is proclaimed; His Sacraments are celebrated. Here is His care and His cure for us. Where the Word and the Sacraments are faithfully proclaimed and celebrated, there is the Church without which there is no care, no cure. Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd of our souls through the Church, His body, by which He gives us His Word, and the tangible and effective signs of His care for us, His Sacraments. His care is rooted in his love for us. That love is our cure. Quite simply, Jesus is our cure who cares for us, provided that we hear the voice of the one who says, “I am the Good Shepherd”.

+In the Name...