

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, Year A
Acts 2:14,36-41; Ps 23:1-3,3-4,5,6; 1 Pt 2:20-25; Jn 10:1-10

THE GOOD SHEPHERD TAKES ON THE BAD SHEPHERDS

Homily by Fr. Michael A. Van Sloun
Sunday, May 7, 2017, 7:15 a.m.,
Vikings Rookie Camp, Winter Park, Eden Prairie, Minnesota

If I was a news reporter,
and I were to approach people as they were leaving church on Sunday morning,
and I were to ask them to give me a description of Jesus,
I suspect that I would get a lot of responses like:
“Jesus is very kind and loving”;
“Jesus is very patient and understanding”;
or very Minnesota-like, “Jesus is Mister Nice Guy.”

After listening to the Good Shepherd gospel,
and thinking about all those sheep, a person might even say,
“Jesus, like the wool of his sheep, is soft and warm and gentle.”

Warm and gentle, and “Mister Nice Guy,”
did not get Jesus put to death on a cross.

Jesus is all about love (Jn 13:34; 15:13), but he is also all about truth (Jn 8:32,40,45; 14:6),
and he was incredibly strong and courageous in a very tough environment.

When people hear the Good Shepherd gospel,
so many have such pious images of Jesus:
Jesus tenderly holding a sheep in his arms;
Jesus kindly carrying a sheep on his shoulders;
Jesus leading a flock of sheep to a watering hole.

In this gospel there is nothing soft and gentle about Jesus.
He is going nose to nose with the Pharisees.

The problem with the gospels that we hear at Mass
is that they are lifted out of context.
We hear a short passage,
but we do not hear what is before it or after it
and how it fits in the overall picture.

The Good Shepherd gospel comes from the beginning of Chapter 10.
Obviously it comes right after Chapter 9.
Chapter 9 is the healing of the blind man.

At the end of Chapter 9, the Pharisees, the religious leaders,
supposedly good and holy men,
examined the blind man who could now see.
When the blind man said that he believed in Jesus,
the Pharisees ridiculed the blind man, and they firmly opposed Jesus.

Jesus did not run away afraid.
He glared at them: “Bring it on!”
He told the whole truth and nothing but the truth,
in a way that made them furious.
His final comment was, pointing at the blind man,
“If you were blind, you would have no sin” (Jn 9:41a),
and then, shifting to them, he said, and get this:
“But now you are saying, ‘we see,’ so your sin remains” (Jn 9:41b).
Jesus just called them out.
Jesus said that they were a bunch of sinners,
right to their faces with everyone listening.

Then, Jesus spoke to the people and the Pharisees about shepherding,
but because this passage is usually heard “stand alone,” by itself,
and not in the context of the previous chapter,
the listeners usually miss the fact that Jesus is squaring off with Pharisees.

When he said, “I am the Good Shepherd,”
it was as-opposed to the Pharisees who were bad shepherds.
The Pharisees were smart enough to figure this out.
Their anger meter was climbing fast.

Jesus spoke about a sheepfold, a pen.
It is the place where the sheep bed down over night.
The pen, the enclosure for animals, is an image for heaven.
Jesus was saying to the people, with the Pharisees listening,
“I am the gate.”
“I am your passageway to heaven.”
“I am your ticket to heaven.”
“If you come to me, I’ll personally escort you into eternal life.”

But Jesus also said, “Whoever does not enter the sheepfold through the gate,
but climbs over elsewhere, is a thief and robber” (Jn 10:1b).

Jesus was talking about the Pharisees.
The Pharisees did not believe in Jesus.
They did not want to go through Jesus.
They did not think that they needed Jesus to be saved.
They did not think that they needed Jesus for anything.

Jesus said very tersely,

“These guys want to climb over elsewhere.”

These Pharisees thought they were saved and could get into heaven another way,
not through Jesus, not through the gate, but by themselves, over the side,
with all of their rules and regulations,
with all of their fake and deceptive religious practices,
all which were for show and not for real.

Jesus was saying,

“If you think that you are getting in over the side of the pen,
if you think that you do not need to go through me,
you are living in la-la land.”

Then, speaking to the crowd, with the Pharisees right there listening,

Jesus said, referring to the Pharisees, their spiritual leaders,

“The ones that want to get into the pen over the side,
they are thieves and robbers’ (paraphrase, Jn 10:1).

The Pharisees knew that Jesus was speaking about them.

The Good Shepherd may sound like a nice story.

It’s not.

It’s a show down, a smack down.

Then Jesus, speaking about himself as the Good Shepherd, says,

“He calls his own sheep by name, and he leads them out” (Jn 10:3);

“He walks ahead of them, and the sheep follow him,
because they recognize his voice” (Jn 10:4).

We have to understand how shepherding works to understand this figure of speech.

It is evening and it is time to put the sheep in the pen for the night.

Many flocks were not very big, 20 in this flock, 30 in that flock,
and the capacity of the pen was maybe 150.

More than one flock could bed down in the same pen at the same time.

Shepherd A would bring his flock, followed by Shepherd B, followed by Shepherd C.

The sheep would be in the pen together overnight.

They would intermingle.

In the morning when it was time to leave,

Shepherd A would go to the gate, “OK, my sheep, come with me,”

and because his sheep recognized his voice,

only his sheep would follow him out of the pen,

and they would line up right behind and follow him out.

The sheep have an amazing ability to differentiate voices.

Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice” (paraphrase, Jn 10:3,16).

Jesus just blasted the Pharisees again.

Remember, Jesus was speaking to the crowd with the Pharisees right there.

Jesus was saying, “When it comes to your religious leaders,
the people who want to guide you,
there are a plenty of voices out there.”

And here is the zinger.

Jesus was saying,

“If you listen to me, if you follow me, I will lead you to a good place,
but if you listen to these Pharisees, and if you follow them,
they will lead you nowhere, because they are bad shepherds.”

This is not warm and fuzzy Jesus.

This is Jesus speaking the truth,

the abrasive truth,

the not politically correct truth.

The Pharisees were no dummies.

They knew what Jesus was talking about.

So did the people (disregard Jn 10:6).

Jesus was inviting the crowd to differentiate between voices.

The sheep could pick out the voices of different shepherds,

and Jesus wants his disciples to do the same.

I know from my basketball playing days

that what Jesus wants can be done.

I was amazed at this discovery when I was a sophomore in high school.

I was playing on the JV basketball team.

During a game, the gym was filled with screaming voices,

our fans, our parents,

their fans, their parents,

and my coach on the sideline,

calling plays, calling defenses, calling changes in match ups,

and while I was on the floor playing,

I was amazed at my ability to do selective hearing,

in the middle of all those voices,

to be able to pick out my coach’s voice,

because no one other than the coach was offering helpful guidance.

There is the voice of Jesus

and the voice of the strangers (see Jn 10:5).

The Pharisees were not strangers.

They were standing right there.

But, they were estranged from God.

Jesus was saying to the people in the crowd,

“You hear many different voices.

There is Pharisee A, and Pharisee B, and Pharisee C, and me.

Use your selective hearing, like any sheep can do, and listen to me – and not them.”

What was true 2000 years ago is true today.

There are many different voices competing for our attention.

There are voices in entertainment.

There are voices in business.

There are voices on the Internet.

And there is the voice of Jesus.

The other voices will not take us to happiness in this life,
nor will the other voices take us to the Promised Land.

Jesus wants us to use our selective hearing.

With all of the voices and sounds that bombard us,

Jesus wants us to pick out his voice,

and not only to select his voice,

but to listen to his voice

and to follow where Jesus, the Good Shepherd, leads.