

# 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

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“I am the good shepherd.” The image of the good shepherd is an ancient one. Frescoes can be seen in a number of ancient Christian places. In some of these the Good Shepherd carries a lamb over his shoulders. But the image is far from being sentimental. These early frescoes were executed in penal times when the early Christians worshipped on pain of arrest, torture and death. To them the Good Shepherd was a reminder of salvation, a source of courage, a guarantee that they would be brought safely to heaven and, they hoped, be steered around pressing worldly dangers. The shepherd was not a kindly man in a pleasant meadow far removed from real life, but the key to life in the midst of death.

Why does Our Lord choose this image of the Good Shepherd and his sheep? It is part of the heritage of the people of Israel. Their ancestors were wandering shepherds and goatherds. King David was a shepherd boy. It was natural for them to see their King as a Shepherd even if the tide of history had led them to lose sight of this and to expect the Messiah to come from a more prestigious background than that of carpenter. However, Our Lord’s choice of this image is not just about his own credentials. It is about his relationship with us. He is not a hireling. For him we are all individuals. He knows you and me as well as we know our pets at home and care about them. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. Our Lord is not just making a statement of principle. He is hinting at how he will give his life for you and for me.

Sheep are not as stupid as we sometimes think. God made them gregarious – a word that comes from the Latin ‘*grex*’ or flock. For many creatures, whether four legged or birds or fish, this gregarious instinct offers them protection and also guides them to sources of food and places suitable for breeding. But they remain individuals. They can become detached from the flock and be exposed to danger. Predators seek to achieve this by singling out and harrying an animal or bird that is slower or more adventurous and somehow becomes separated from the others.

We human beings are not so different despite the cult of individuality. We cannot thrive without the support and love of family and friends. Sometimes we take our sense of direction from our peers and sometimes we strike out on our own. God chooses to make us his children – one family with Jesus as our oldest brother to guide us and help us. How we live is important to him. To him we must so often look exactly like aimless and directionless creatures. We can ignore the Scriptures and the Sacraments he has given us to guide and feed us because we think we know better. We can drift aimlessly through life, thinking only, as it were, of the next tuft of grass. We can follow others into danger without realising it or lead them astray.

Jesus lays his life on the line to protect us and guide us in the way that will lead us to flowing water and green pasture. He did not stop doing this when he returned to heaven at the Ascension. He chose the twelve apostles to assist him and to continue his role as shepherds of the growing flock. The word ‘*episkopos*’/bishop means one who has oversight. Our Lord continues to call people today to work with the bishops as priests and pastors. It is a challenging invitation. Those whom he calls must love his people enough to give their lives for them, e.g. Sts Maximilian Kolbe and John Nepomuk.

Discovering God’s call is not easy. In his message for today Pope Francis emphasises the need to listen, to discern but also to live. We discover the call by living the Gospel today in our everyday decisions and responding to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. *“The joy of the Gospel, which makes us open to encountering God and our brothers and sisters, does not abide our slowness and our sloth. It will not fill our hearts if we keep standing by the window with the excuse of waiting for the right time, without accepting this very day the risk of making a decision. Vocation is today! The Christian mission is now! Each one of us is called – whether to the lay life in marriage, to the priestly life in the ordained ministry, or to a life of special consecration – in order to become a witness of the Lord, here and now.”*