

4th Sunday of Easter
Good Shepherd Sunday and World Day of Prayer for Vocations
Acts 2:42-47 • Psalm 23 • 1 Peter 2:19-25 • John 10:1-10

Dear friends,

We in Australia have a different experience of ‘shepherding’ sheep as they did or still do in near Middle-Eastern communities. When we drive from Sydney to Canberra, we would drive along the vast plains of Lake George where undisturbed flocks of sheep feed, sleep etc. without a shepherd. Throughout the journey you would see pockets of the same sporadically grazing in the fields –without shepherds.

To speak of being a Shepherd, we might think at first that this is an alien image to contemporary communities that do not have similar contexts and experience as those in Jesus’ day. Why did Jesus use the image of ‘Shepherd’ to show us how he loves and guides us. In order to appreciate what Our Lord is doing here, we need to look at Chapter 40 of the Book of Isaiah. This Chapter begins with the words, “*Comfort, comfort, my people, says your God (Is 40:1)!’* Those who are familiar with Handel’s Messiah will recall that Handel employs these words as the first vocal movement of his musical masterpiece “*Messiah.*” In these words from Isaiah we find the theme of this chapter which are further articulated by the words, “*He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young (Is 40:11).*” And so in proclaiming that he, Jesus is the sheep gate, through whom one should enter, Our Lord portrays to us an image that reveals to us that he is the one through whom, by whom and “*in whom we live, and move and have our being (Acts 17:28).*” What sheep farmer can say the same words?

Today’s Psalm holds the balance of God’s love and mercy that is not swayed even by our sins and brokenness but a scale that is measured only by love. The love of God is such that he knows and calls us by our names. He knows each of us personally. He is ‘*attentive to the tiny details of our lives (St Therese).* Do we hear him calling us as he says that “*the sheep hear his voice (Jn 10:3)?*” He goes ahead of us and he leads us. *How well do we cooperate with the initiative of God who always takes the first step to save us?*

If Jesus is a Shepherd-the true Shepherd then where is his sheepfold. He must have a vast pasture on which to lead his flock, feed them, give them drink, and assure them safety. *Where could this pasture be?* The first reading gives us the answer:

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved (Acts 2:42-47).”

I have highlighted here key words or phrases that should point us to the fact – *the sheepfold of the Lord is the Church-the body of believers.*

In the Catechism of the Catholic Church we read:

"...(#753) In Scripture, we find a host of interrelated images and figures through which Revelation speaks of the inexhaustible mystery of the Church. The images taken from the Old Testament are variations on a profound theme: the People of God. In the New Testament, all these images find a new centre because Christ has become the head of this people, which henceforth is his Body.¹⁴⁴ Around this centre are grouped images taken "from the life of the shepherd or from cultivation of the land, from the art of building or from family life and marriage."¹⁴⁵

"The Church is, accordingly, a sheepfold, the sole and necessary gateway to which is Christ. It is also the flock of which God himself foretold that he would be the shepherd, and whose sheep, even though governed by human shepherds, are unfailingly nourished and led by Christ himself, the Good Shepherd and Prince of Shepherds, who gave his life for his sheep (#754)."

It is at Mass where Jesus the Good Shepherd gathers us in his embrace, he guides us with his living Word, and he feeds us with his Body and with his precious Blood gives us drink, refreshment and peace (Jn 5:51).

Being Good Shepherd Sunday, I ask you to continue to pray for your priests and Bishops. Pray for us that we be shepherds after the heart of Christ. Pray that we be pastors who are only interested in the sheep and not just the wool.

In Christ,

Fr Epeli