

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER B/2006

When Joseph and Mary presented Jesus at his birth in the temple, Simeon told them, "This child will be a sign from God which many people will speak against and so reveal their secret thoughts". These words have been realized in the life of Jesus and, especially, in his passion and death. While he was traveling the whole country, preaching the Good News of his Father and healing the sick, he was falsely accused, rejected, then, unjustly put to death. But by raising him from the dead, the Father has cleared him, restored his dignity of the Son of God, and confirmed him as the savior of the world.

In this perspective, the words of Peter to the leaders of the people sound right as he presents Jesus as the stone rejected by the builders, which has become the cornerstone. Not only has God given him life back, but also Jesus himself gives life to all those who invoke his name. It is in his name that the cripple has been cured and restored to full life. The healing of the cripple, which is only physical, is a sign of the total salvation God has in store for all peoples who believe in his beloved Jesus. Because God the Father has put everything in his hands, from now on Jesus is someone to be reckoned with when it is about the salvation of the world, in the present and in the future generations, as well as it was in the past. That is the reason why Peter says: "There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved".

Such a statement has many consequences, some of which I would like to highlight. In fact, if there is no salvation outside the name of Jesus, it means that Jesus Christ is the fullness of the revelation of God to the world. He is the plenitude of communication that God has established with human beings since the creation of the world. In other words, all other ways of approaching God defined in terms of world religions are just human attempts to know God, but which remain imperfect. It does not mean, however, that Christians should pride themselves and despise other religions. On the contrary, they should appreciate, with humility of heart, any value in those religions that sounds holy, sane and worthy of praise, knowing that the Father, in his mercy and patience, can bring them one day to the fullness of truth in Jesus Christ.

This consideration helps us understand why Jesus says, "he has other sheep that do not belong to this fold, that these he also must lead, and they will hear his voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd". While these words of Jesus invite us to reinforce the mission he has entrusted to us to bring the Good News of God's kingdom to the world, he teaches us also to be tolerant and respectful of those who do not share our faith. It is Christ who will lead them and not us; it is Christ, and him alone, who has laid down his life for his sheep. Our duty is just to bear him witness to the world and to tell them that Christ is the savior.

More than that, what makes Christ also to be the savior of the world is that he is the true and good shepherd appointed by the Father to take care of the whole world. A good shepherd is recognized by his diligence in handling the sheep, his particular concern for the herd, and the care he has in providing food, protection and medical treatment for each one of his sheep. He does not leave the sheep in ailment in time of snow, heat, rain or storms. With such a shepherd, the sheep are safe, secure and healthy. Jesus is

that shepherd who lays down his life for our salvation. Jesus is the fierce protector, the fighter who does not leave carelessly the sheep in the wilderness at the risk of the predators. He stands up to anybody who threatens his flock and loves each one of them with the same love. A hired man, to whom the flock does not belong, is interested only in money, salary and advantages he can draw from the sheep.

Whoever has the heart of a mercenary and hired man will stick to the minimum laid down in his contract. The one who has the heart of a true shepherd does not stop considering his rights, his duties, what the law asks of him, what agreement binds him to his master; his law is just one, namely his love for the sheep, and love knows no limits, runs risks, accepts sacrifices, and is ready to suffer for the flock. Is it not like this that we accept any sacrifice for the love of our own children?

In this context, we understand why John insists on the love the Father has for us in sending his Son to be our shepherd and to lay down his life for us. Thanks to Jesus Christ, we have a new dignity of spiritual birth, we share a same heritage with him and, from now on, we are truly God's children. But as far as human history is still unfolding, as far as we have not yet finished our pilgrimage on earth, the fullness of our heritage as God's children is not yet revealed. A day will come where everything will be revealed; there will be no more barrier between God and us, no more separation between Him and us...in that day "we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is". In that day the sun will shine forever on those freed from the darkness of ignorance of God and perdition, in that day the spring will last forever on those released from the winter of evil-doing and sin. May these words of the Lord assure each one of us to hope for our eternal reward! May we entrust our life to Christ, the good shepherd who is able to take care of us more than human beings to whom we entrust blindly our lives at our own risk! May the God of Jesus Christ bless us all in the Holy Spirit!



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