

Fourth Sunday of Easter A/2008

The death of Jesus has been a notorious act, and a public event that took place in the life of Jewish society. The inhabitants of Jerusalem have seen Jesus arrested, judged, condemned, crucified and dead. That the same Jesus who was dead is now alive, that has been witnessed only to the group of his followers. Then, transformed by Christ's resurrection, the apostles went out to tell the people what happened to Jesus they had crucified. It is in that context we have to understand today's first reading as Peter stands before the crowd and talks to them about the risen Christ.

As the people are shaken to the depths of their hearts, they want to know what to do now that they are convinced they were wrong by crucifying Jesus. With courage and determination, Peter calls them to repentance, the reception of baptism and the Holy Spirit.

Why is Peter insisting on baptism? Baptism is important, in fact, because it is the first step that shows our intent of turning away from sins and our commitment to change our life and give it to Jesus. Without faithfulness to the promises of our baptism, the Spirit of Christ cannot dwell within us. For that, we have to remember that Christ himself bore our sins in his body upon the cross, so that, free from sin, we might live for righteousness.

Because those who have been baptized in Jesus have become new creatures, they have to change their lives in the image of Jesus. That is why Peter insists that Christ must be taken as an example by all those who suffer any kind of trouble and injustice for the sake of their faith. But, that can be possible only when they let themselves be guided by the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, it is the Holy Spirit who allows us to call God, Father. When we say of someone that "he is my father", it means that we acknowledge, in some way, having the same blood with him; we acknowledge that we are not at all strangers to him. In that perspective, those who let themselves be baptized in the name of Jesus, the Son of God, have the same heritage with him. They become de facto sons and daughters of God, the people of God whose master and leader is Jesus. It is in this context, we have to understand why the Gospel presents Jesus as the shepherd of the flock.

Jesus is the good shepherd who knows his sheep, each one by his own name. He can lead them to green pastures where they can be fed to their fill. He is not like the bad shepherds who came before to destroy the flocks and let the sheep wander without protection, at the wild animals' mercy, and the vandalism of thieves and robbers.

The use of the image of shepherd by Jesus is strong and suggestive of who he truly is for us. In fact, in Israel constant vigilance, fearless courage in defending the cattle against the predators, and the patient love for his flock were the main characteristics of good shepherds. A good shepherd was remarkable for the particular attention he gave to his sheep, his solicitude for the welfare of the flock and his zeal for the prosperity of his cattle. When Jesus says "He is the good

shepherd”, he means that he is a shepherd who will risk his life to seek and save the straying sheep so that all may come to eternal salvation.

In the same way, any leader of the Church, who wants to assume his role in the footsteps of Jesus, has to act and conduct himself like Jesus. The leaders of the Church, our pastors, are the shepherds and we, the people, are the flock. It is the duty of the leader to feed the flock of God, to accept the oversight willingly and not by constraint, to do it eagerly, and not to use the position for the exercise of power, and to be an example of the flock, says, St Peter(1 Peter 5, 2-3). This is true for the Church as it is for our families. The question, then, is: How good a leader are you for your family?

Jesus is truly our good shepherd. The description the Gospel gives us today is just a self-portrait of Jesus. Jesus is not only a good shepherd whose voice is recognized by his sheep, but he is also the gate to the sheepfold. In order to enter into the proximity of God, which is the enclosure of the sheepfold, we have to find Jesus, the gate.

Through Jesus and Jesus alone, have we access to God. He opens the way to God. Through Jesus, God gives himself to the world, and the world has access to God in a unique way. Jesus is the gate through which the entrance to God becomes possible. Because he is the gate, through him we can go in and come out unharmed and safe, and find our freedom and our nourishment. When people can go in and out without fear, it means that their country is at peace, that law and order are respected, and that they enjoy perfect security. When our life is in God’s hands like that, the worries and fear are gone, because there is an assurance that the good shepherd, Jesus, looks after us.

Jesus claims that he came that we may have life and might have it in abundance. To believe in Jesus and to follow him is to start a new existence that is based on mutual communion between the shepherd and the sheep, a communion that is symbolic of the reciprocal love that unites the Father and the Son. To be a disciple of Jesus, to know who he is and what he means, is to have a superabundance of life. When we walk with Jesus, there comes a new vitality, a superabundance of life. It is only when we live with Christ that life becomes really worth living and we begin to live in the real sense of the word.

Let us pray on this Good Shepherd Sunday for the leaders of our Church, our Pope, Bishops, priests, and all those who have a particular mission to fulfill for the good of God’s people so that they might be rooted in the Spirit of Jesus and take the example of Christ as model for their position inside the Church. God bless you all!

Acts 2, 14a, 36-41; 1 Peter 2, 20b-25; John 10, 1-10



Homily Date: April 13, 2008
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Contact: www.mbala.org
Document Name: 20080413omily.pdf