

Fourth Sunday of Easter B/2012

The readings of this fourth Sunday of Easter contrast the joy of the disciples about the resurrection of Jesus with the reluctance of the Jewish people in accepting him. They also invite us to make a clear choice in favor of Jesus, the good shepherd of our lives.

The first reading of the Acts of Apostles describes the speech of Peter before the leaders and the elders of the people of Israel. The occasion of the speech was the healing of a crippled man performed by Peter in the name of Jesus. The chief priests and the elders, unhappy about what happened, interrogated the disciples.

Without any hesitation, Peter explained to the leaders of the people and the elders that it was in the name of Jesus that the man was healed. He also took advantage of the incident to remind them that although they killed Jesus, God raised him. That is why he calls Jesus a stone that the builders have rejected, but which God has made a cornerstone. Peter declared also to them that there is no name given to the human race on earth by which human beings could be saved except that of Jesus.

What this text would like to highlight is the central place that Jesus plays in our lives as our savior. Moreover, the text would like to draw our attention to the fact that Jesus is the plenitude of God's communication to the world. Therefore, in him, God has revealed to the world his total will so that no salvation can be given to the human race outside of him.

All that helps us understand why in the Gospel Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd. First of all, the Gospel contrasts the good shepherd with a bad shepherd. The latter is a hired man who works only for money. He does not know the sheep, because he has no concern for them. What counts the most for him are the advantages he can have from the sheep. That it is why, once he sees a wolf coming, he just runs away and does not protect and defend the flock.

On the contrary, Jesus is a good shepherd. He knows his sheep and the sheep know him, just as his Father knows him and he knows the Father. Because he is concerned about the wellbeing of the sheep, he does not spare his energy and strength when it is about defending his sheep. Unlike the hired man, he is able to lay down his life for them.

Jesus adds also that he has other sheep which do not belong to his fold. Those, too, he must lead and they will hear his voice so that there will be one flock and one shepherd. Because he is able to lay down his life for his flock, the Father loves him. After all, anything of what he does is to fulfill the command he has received from his Father.

What do we learn from this Gospel? First of all, let us say something about the role of a shepherd. Unlike today, in the modern world, where the sheep on the farms live in a fenced stall and are protected, the wellbeing of the sheep in the Ancient Israel depended, for the most part, on the care the shepherd could provide.

In that perspective, any negligence on the part of a shepherd could be fatal to the sheep. If a robber or a wild animal invaded the flock, it was the duty of the shepherd to defend and protect the sheep. Sometimes, the danger could be such that he had to risk his own life in order to save the sheep. If, on contrary, taken by fear he ran away, that was a disaster for the sheep.

By using this image of a good shepherd, Jesus would like to tell us that he is the one who takes care of us. He does it in such a way that he risks even his own life in order to save us. That is exactly what he has done through his passion and death for our salvation. With him, we are secure and without him, we are insecure. In that context, it is in our interest to listen to Jesus and put ourselves under his guidance and leadership.

The second thing I want to say is about the symbolism of shepherd. To be a shepherd is to be a leader. As human experience has taught us, there can be good leaders as well as bad leaders. A good leader can be a blessing for those under his charge and a bad leader a curse for them. Good leaders or bad leaders can be found everywhere, including in families, companies, schools, churches, etc. A good leader is the one who cares for those entrusted to him and does everything in his power and ability in order to keep his beloved healthy, safe and secure. Such a one is not driven by gain and interest, but only by the welfare of his own.

If a leader neglects to care for the good of those entrusted to him, he is a bad leader. That is why each one of us has to ask himself how he fulfills the role of leadership over the family, the company or the business, etc. Moreover, one thing is to be providing for the material needs of the people entrusted to us, and another is to provide for their spiritual needs. Of course, there is no opposition between these modes of leadership, but how wonderful would it be if we could be both good and spiritual leaders!

The last thing I have to say is about tolerance. When Jesus says in the Gospel that he has other sheep that do not belong to this fold which he has to lead so that there must be one flock and one shepherd, he is challenging us. In fact, we live in a divided world religion where not everybody believes in Jesus. For some known and unknown reasons, there are many religions in the world whose reference has nothing to do with Jesus.

Given the particular role we assign to Jesus as the savior of the world, we can be, as Christians, tempted to be prideful and despising of other religions. We should not, however, forget that God the Father, in his mercy and patience, can one day bring all under one leadership of Christ. That is why, while Jesus' statement gives us courage to keep going with the mission of the Church, we have always to be humble and respectful, considerate of others and kindhearted toward those who do not share our faith.

Let us pray that the Lord may help us to entrust our lives to Jesus the good shepherd, so that he may protect us and care for us. Like Jesus, let us, in turn, be the good and spiritual leaders of our families and the people entrusted to us. Let us pray for one another so that we come to maintain good leadership among us. May God bless you all!

Acts of Apostles 4: 8-12; 1 John 3: 1-2; John 10: 11-18



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