

Fourth Sunday of Easter B2018

The readings of this fourth Sunday of Easter continue to account for the resurrection of Jesus. They show how the risen Christ has made the apostles his witnesses and how he is himself the good shepherd of his flock. They invite us to make a clear choice in favor of Jesus, the good shepherd of our lives.

The first reading of the Acts of the Apostles describes the speech of Peter before the leaders and the elders of the people of Israel. It gives the historical context of his speech by referring to the healing that Peter performed at the benefice of a crippled man. It shows how Peter took advantage of that healing in order to tell the story of Jesus. It shows equally the significant role Jesus plays as the savior of the world and the redeemer of the human race.

What is behind this text is the idea that the resurrection of Jesus strengthened the disciples to bear witness to Jesus before the people. There is also the idea that, though Jesus was rejected by his own, he remains nonetheless the one without whom no one can be saved.

This text allows understanding of what is at stake in today's Gospel as it talks about Jesus as the good shepherd of his flock. First of all, the Gospel reports the speech of Jesus in which he states that he is the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

Then, it contrasts the behavior of the good shepherd and that of the hireling who runs away once he sees the wolves coming to attack the sheep. After that, the Gospel continues with Jesus' speech where he says that he is the shepherd who knows his sheep including those who are not now part of his flock. It accounts of his will that those too might become part of his sheep so that it might be only one flock. The Gospel ends with Jesus affirming that, because he is capable of laying down his life for his sheep, the Father loves him and that is also the command he has received from him.

What do we learn from today's Gospel? Today, I want to talk about the importance of spiritual leadership. In fact, in the Gospel, Jesus says that he is a good shepherd of his flock who knows his sheep. He says also that his sheep listen to his voice and follow him. He affirms that he lays down his life for his sheep and he is not like a hired man who works only for salary and who sees the wolves and runs away.

By following this speech of Jesus, we need to distinguish the real context from the symbolic reference of his words. In fact, in ancient Israel, the sheep were part of the normal process of farming. At the occasion of my trip to Israel, I could see with my own eyes, as I was leaving from Jericho to Nazareth, the way the sheep were led by the shepherd up the mountain, on an open field.

In fact, unlike in today's world, the sheep did not live in a fenced stall, watered, fed and protected as they are. Instead, their wellbeing depended totally and completely on the care the shepherd could provide. In that sense, any negligence on the part of the shepherd would be fatal to the sheep. If a robber or a wild animal invaded the flock, it was his duty to defend and protect the sheep. Sometimes, the danger could be such that the shepherd had to risk his own life in order to save the sheep.

By using the image of good shepherd, Jesus wants 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 by dying on the cross for our salvation. He did not hesitate to sacrifice his own life so that we might live.

That is why we are assured that Jesus will lead us to eternal life. That is the reason why also the Father sent him in the world so that whoever believes in him may not perish, but has eternal life. In that sense, if we want to be saved, we have to listen to him, to follow him and follow his guidance.

All that helps us understand that when Jesus speaks about being a good shepherd, what he means is that he is a good spiritual leader who leads those who belong to him to eternal salvation. If that is true, then, it becomes clear that his point is not only to state that he is a good shepherd of his flock, it aims also at inviting us to become good shepherds, like him.

That is why the Gospel contains also a symbolic reference in the sense that it invites us to become good leaders and especially spiritual leaders of those God has entrusted to us. In fact, in the experience of daily life, people do a lot of things in order to show their leadership.

For instance, they work hard in order to provide for the needs of their families; they assume their responsibility by taking care of the bills coming to their desks; they manage their business with diligence, competence and skill, etc. Anyone working in such a manner can be a blessing for those under his charge, because not only does he show how much he cares for the things he does, but he also does everything in his power and ability in order to keep his beloved ones healthy, safe, secure and happy.

However, it is one thing to be a leader for material things and it is another to be a leader for spiritual matters. In that sense, it does not suffice to be a good leader in material things; we need also to be good spiritual leaders of our families, our household, our business, etc.

A spiritual leader is the one who does not limit his role only to paying the bills or providing for the needs of his family, but also who cares for the spiritual welfare of those entrusted to him. That is the type of shepherds we need today, namely those who sacrifice everything for the material and spiritual success of those under their care.

Let us pray, then, that God may give us good shepherds who care for the full integrity, material and spiritual, and the welfare of their beloved ones. May he give us a clear vision of what leadership means at the example of Jesus! May God bless you all!

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

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