

Fourth Sunday of Easter C2022

The readings of this fourth Sunday of Easter talk about the work of evangelization and its difficulties. They invite us to realize that whatever might happen to us in the mission, Jesus is always with us and takes care of us as the Good Shepherd.

The first reading of the Acts of the Apostles describes the missionary work of Paul and Barnabas in the region of Antioch. It shows what they did in exhorting the converts to remain faithful to the grace of God. It also shows the effect of their teaching on the population, the counter reaction of those who opposed Jesus and their destination to the gentile lands.

What is behind this text is the idea that eternal life comes to us through the conversion of heart. Another idea is the truth that life is not a continuous successful story; therefore only those who, in spite of hardships, persevere will reap God's reward.

This text allows us to understand the point of today's Gospel as Jesus presents himself as the Good Shepherd who takes care of his sheep. First of all, the Gospel starts with Jesus' statement that his sheep listen to his voice and follow him. Then, it affirms that Jesus gives eternal life to his sheep so that they don't perish. After that, it talks about Jesus' assurance that what is in his hand no one can take away or from the hand of his Father. The Gospel finishes with the affirmation of the unity between Jesus and the Father.

What do we learn from this Gospel? This Sunday of the Good Shepherd is also the celebration of Mothers' Day. I would like to start the homily with a story I read on internet: A couple of years ago appeared on CNN a twenty-five-years-old man from San Francisco, who was dying of AIDS. Because of that, he was rejected by his family and disowned by his father. His mother was already dead. In spite of this painful situation, he seemed serene. The reporter asked him how he was able to stand all of the pain, not only of the looming death, but the pain of family rejection. He gave an interesting answer. He said: "I stand it by closing my eyes and imagining that I will awaken in the arms of my mother. I know that she will never leave my side."

This story gave me a lot to think about the virtues of motherhood and the features of a good shepherd. A mother is life giving; she is loving (whatever what) as we see in the case of parents having a handicapped child. A mother is caring, protecting, forgiving, understanding, nurturing, etc. Are not these too the qualities of a good shepherd?

That is why on this celebration, I want you to see the good shepherd with the lens of a mother whose heart is so big that it embraces in order to give life, to care, protect and nurture.

In fact, today's Gospel starts with the verse 27 of chapter 10 of John, where Jesus says: "My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me." This declaration comes amidst the confrontation of Jesus with the Pharisees who contest the authenticity of his identity, action and mission. In response, Jesus reminds them that they do so because they are not of his sheep. The premises to this verse are found at verses 11 and 14: "I am a good shepherd."

In general, a shepherd did not walk behind the sheep with a stick to keep them moving. He walked in front of them, seeking always a safe path to food and water, protecting the

sheep in case of danger and sheltering them in case of a storm. The sheep followed him as they recognized his voice and trusted him. Such a vision is immortalized in Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want..."

The consequence of such a vision is that Jesus is our perpetual companion and support on our life's journey. In times of difficult problems or crosses coming our way, his presence reassures us that we are not alone or abandoned. He is supporting us and holding us up.

The irony, however, is that instead of listening to Jesus, we often listen to other voices that kill our hearing to the point that we become deaf to the voice of Jesus. Sometimes, we follow easily other masters than Jesus who can lead us to the Father where our eternal salvation is guaranteed.

Nobody can take anything from the hands of Jesus or his Father. Whatever might happen to us, be it good or bad, we will never be crushed down and we will never be alone. In that sense, as long as we listen to Jesus and follow him, our eternal salvation and our spiritual safety is assured.

It is not Jesus himself who has given (himself) – please allow this tautology – the guard of the sheep, but rather his Father. The Father who has given him the sheep is greater than all, and no one can take them from his hand. By saying so, Jesus shows how he lives in unity with the Father to the point that what he wants is also wanted by his Father.

The assurance about eternal life he offers is also given by the Father. Jesus does not act on his own, but rather in union with the Father. He draws his glory from the Father and through his actions he gives glory back to the Father. There is nothing he does independently, but always in union with the Father.

That union of Jesus with the Father is something we have to deeply long for in our hearts and put into practice in our own lives. If for some reasons, we do not maintain a relationship of unity with the Father and Jesus, - through prayer, personal commitment, and individual witness of life - our life falls apart. If we grow apart from Jesus and his Father, we cannot maintain a viable relationship with them.

Our relationship with God becomes complete when it also takes into account our relationship with our fellows. Any neglect of our relationship with our fellows is dangerous. It tends to isolate us and deceive us with regard to our eternal salvation.

Let us pray that God may help us to stay in unity with him and with one another so that his word may prosper in us. Let us listen to Jesus and follow him so that we stay in union with him and with his Father. Let us pray for all our priests, that they have the heart of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. May God bless you all!

Acts 13: 14, 43-52; Revelation 7: 9, 14-17; John 10: 27-30



Homily Date: May 08, 2022
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Document Name: 20220508homily