

TWO QUALITIES OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD

(A Reflection for the 4th Sunday of Easter, 25.04.21 by Fr Galadima Bitrus, OSA)

Last Sunday, we reflected on Christ as our advocate, who loves us so much so that he not only defends us from the charges of our sins but is even willing to die so as to free us from the condemnation that we merit. Today, being the 4th Sunday of Easter, the readings help us to meditate on Christ the Shepherd who loves his flock so much that he will not only do everything to bring healing to the sick but is willing to go as far as dying to save those in danger.

Christ proves to be powered by much and pure love, the kind of love that puts the beloved always in the first place. This kind of love is an essential ingredient both in being the kind of unique advocate that we have in Christ and the kind of Shepherd we can be proud to call “The Good Shepherd”.

The 1st Reading (Acts 4:8-12) presents Peter’s defense after he and John had been arrested following the healing of the lame man at the Beautiful Gate. Peter had given a speech in which he called upon the people who came to them in admiration, to repent from their sins and receive forgiveness (see Acts 3:1-4:7).

Following this, they were arrested and as they were being interrogated, Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, told the Jewish rulers, elders and scribes, that the healing of the lame man, for which they were being interrogated, took place by the name of Jesus Christ the stone which they had rejected and crucified but which with the resurrection, has become the cornerstone. Peter also proclaimed that there is salvation in no one else and in no other name but only Jesus.

The phrase, “the stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (Acts 4:11) is taken from Psalm 118:22 and is used to describe the rejection of Christ leading to his passion and death, and his rebound in the power of the resurrection, which became the source of healing, forgiveness of sins and salvation to those who believed.

This experience of the resurrection and its healing and salvific power proved to be unique and never seen or heard before, hence, Peter’s proclamation in v.12: “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we ought to be saved.” By proclaiming Jesus’ resurrection and the unequal power and dignity of his name, the apostles risked their lives for the one they have come to love so purely and so much. In the zeal of the apostles, we see an example of followers who have come to know and to love their shepherd profoundly.

In the 2nd Reading (1 John 3:1-2), the author addresses his listeners as “beloved” (Gk, “agapētoi”) and states, “we are now children of God” (Gk, “nun tekna Theou esmen”). In this way, we understand the generative power of love and how love creates networks of relationships.

It is love that makes us children of God and God our father; it is love that makes a woman the wife of the husband and a man the husband of his wife; it is love that makes brothers and sisters and parents and children. These are not merely sociological designations. They are born of love and genuinely exist only where love exists genuinely. Once we have hearts that love, then we cannot but see how we are related with one another in so many profound ways.

In the Gospel (John 10:11-18), Christ, by virtue of his sacrificial love, identifies himself as “the Good Shepherd”, different from hirelings. While the hireling can abandon his flock in the face of danger, the Good Shepherd, who is powered by profound love for his flock, is willing and able to lay down his life for the sheep. Jesus’ love for his sheep generates another network of love with the father. As we read in vv.17-18: “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life...of my own accord.”

The Shepherd (Gk, “ho poimēn”) is a metaphor for the leader in the Bible and the sheep or the flock (Gk, “prōbaton”) a metaphor for the people who are being lead. Jesus the Good Shepherd (“ho poimēn ho kalos”) therefore shows us the model of a good leader: one who loves so much as to be willing and able to lay down his life for his sheep.

Another characteristic of the good shepherd is found in v. 14: “I know my own and my own know me.” In other words, knowledge of one’s people and the people’s knowledge of the leader is necessary for effective leadership. Ignorance of either the leader or the lead is a dangerous deficit. Mutual knowledge guarantees the empathy of the leader for the followers and of the followers for the leader; it minimizes misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the needs of the followers and of what the leader needs to do in order to meet such needs.

Lord, as we contemplate you as the Good Shepherd girded with profound love and knowledge of your flock, raise, assist and inspire leaders everywhere with the love and the knowledge necessary to effectively lead the people you have entrusted to their care, in accordance with your holy will and following your example, so that they too can share in the joy and the dignity of being good shepherds! Amen!