

Fourth Sunday of Easter 2021

Dr. Thomas J. O'Toole

We notice an upgraded Peter, in today's reading from the Act's of the Apostles. Somewhere between plying his trade upon the waters of Galilee, and a sprint with John towards, and into an empty tomb, Peter has migrated into a new vocation. Our man is first bent from angler into student, and again, from lamb to shepherd. Shortly after the resurrection, Jesus returned to Galilee, where it all began, just as the women of the tomb spoke. Under the moonlight of a Eucharistic meal, Jesus begins to question Peter, not once, but three times. Do you love me? They are liturgical questions like a scrutiny. The Resurrected Christ blesses each of Peter's reconstructive replies with these words. Feed my sheep! You are going become a shepherd, Peter!

Simon whom Jesus renamed Peter, acts before rulers, elders, and scribes, as he is ordained. When summoned into court, prosecutors query, both Peter and John, saying. By what power, or, in who's name have you been charged with carrying on this healing and preaching stuff? Both prisoners take the stand and the whole court witnesses the power of the Holy Spirit promulgating boldly across the lips of a former angler.

Peter the sheep is now Peter the shepherd and he schools Jerusalem's elite, in a way they unaccustomed.

I do like to imagine how many jurors actually yielded Peter's call to transformation and sacrament. On an earlier day, around three thousand individuals underwent conversion and received baptism. We have baptized many here at St Peter's parish in Calgary over the years, and I remember some large Sunday crowds before the pandemic, but to be honest, I do not think we have ever topped three thousand in a single day. Friends this speaks to the power of the Holy Spirit and the magnitude of transformation necessary. Peter, the Good Shepherd's vicar, connects this parish today with the work of tending to God's flock. Surely, we are open to a bit of tweaking along the way.

In court, Peter gives his integrators their answer directly, saying, it was they who crucified Jesus. As such, it is they, and we, who have most to benefit from knowing and accepting the Risen Christ. Peter declares, "There is no path to eternal life that circumvents baptism, Eucharist, reconciliation, charity and believe in the resurrection of Jesus, Son of the Living God." It is very clear. The path forward requires sheep move in step with this shepherd.

John's Gospel is composed in post-resurrection, sacramental reflection. The teachings, therein, concerns themselves primarily with the theological question, who is Jesus? The Psalms proposes a corner stone building member, whereas John's Gospel employs a shepherd metaphor. Both carry deep and evident meaning their listeners. To illustrate, the shepherd image could easily conjure up stories of Israel's founding royalty. Mighty King David chosen from among shepherd boys! Jesus' insertion into that metaphor exposes obvious linkages. In our Lord's discourse, He importantly notes, "I have other sheep who do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice." Here, Jesus is speaking about Gentiles, from whom we are generally descendant. Peter, Paul, the Apostles, bishops and pastors extend that vocation of bringing those other sheep into the fold into these times. It is true many have heard and joined the fold, but I worry if some have scattered or drifted towards the periphery.

How close behind our shepherd, do we follow, or, have we slipped a distance, barely able to hear God's voice. Do we **really** know Jesus our Good Shepherd, or, merely recognize a few anecdotal cultural outer layers? Perhaps with the time we have remaining in the pandemic we might listen for the voice of our Good Shepherd.

Quiet and attentive to lectio prayer and service! We worship the Living God who became creation's Model Shepherd and laid down His life for us. Although this approach to service, often to modernity, seems an inverted model. More commonly, the sheep go to the slaughter. But, in God's design, shepherds filled with mercy and compassion carry the suffering of others. There is only one way to explain that type of visionary leadership. Do you love me? That deep and unexplainable affection for humankind and in fact all creation, that Father, Son and Holy Spirit extend!

Shepherd leadership is always connected to sacrifice, faithfulness, and love. Shepherds use these to move and cause other to join them. True shepherding operates from a heart joyfully bonded to Christ. The world in these days cries out for leadership and Christians must stand shoulder to shoulder. Mother Church asks on this Sunday that we pray for and recommit to developing shepherd leadership and vocations within this community and beyond. Families and all the baptized have a vital role to assume in fostering Christly leadership and sacred vocations.

Parker Palmer, an American, educator, and activist, focuses on issues of, community, leadership, spirituality and social change. He says, “Vocation does not come from a voice ‘out there’ calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice ‘in here’ calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God. Let us listen carefully then to the voice of Jesus our Good Shepherd who we will soon take in this Eucharist, upon our lips and into our hearts.

Amen