

Homily for May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020  
Easter 4  
The Guardian of our Souls

Today is the Sunday commonly known as Good Shepherd Sunday because the overarching theme of the readings celebrates Jesus as the Good Shepherd. In the reading from St. Peter's first epistle, the work of Jesus is described in a captivating way.

***For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.<sup>1</sup>***

Peter first of all states something about our human identity and then goes on to describe something about the Lord's pastoral identity. He describes us as those who stray like sheep as we wander away from the one who is our true centre, the Lord Jesus Christ. He then goes on to state that as we turn towards Christ and put our faith and trust in him, we then discover the one who is both the shepherd and guardian of our souls.

As we think about what it means to declare Jesus as the shepherd and guardian of our souls, it might be helpful to better understand what we mean by the word soul.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church has a very clear and concise definition of the soul when it paragraph 363 it states:

***In Sacred Scripture the term "soul" often refers to human life or the entire human person. But "soul" also refers to the innermost aspect of man, that which is of greatest value in him, that by which he is most especially in God's image: "soul" signifies the spiritual principle in man.***

It is that which is of greatest value, because unlike our physical bodies, which are mortal, our souls are immortal and created by God at the moment of our conception. It is this innermost aspect of our humanity that is of greatest importance. The movement of our soul is either straying from Jesus, like those sheep, or it is being drawn closer to Christ as we discover more fully the one who is the shepherd and guardian of our souls.

The Gospel reading for today makes explicitly clear what Peter in his Epistle states in a more general way. The whole of our earthly life is the place where we are invited to realize ever more profoundly that there is one who is the shepherd and guardian of our souls, Jesus Christ. We also need to be very aware there is one who is the antagonist of our soul, referred to here as the thief and robber, the very devil himself.

Jesus makes it clear that as our shepherd he wants us to know our full identity as those who truly belong to him and so he says of us:

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<sup>1</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition\*](#). (1993). (1 Pe 2:25). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup> When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

The Good Shepherd Jesus is always calling and addressing our souls, inviting us through the course of our earthly life to put our full trust and confidence in him. As we hear more attentively the voice of Jesus, we will discover what the writer to the Hebrews described as the sure and steadfast anchor of our souls. His is the secure and steady voice that enables us to know with ever great conviction what David in Psalm 23 declared:

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—  
they comfort me.*

And yet, we also need to be cognizant of the enemy of our soul who wants to rob us of our true identity as those who belong to Christ. He is always at work seeking to undermine the pastoral care of Jesus. He wants to rob of our souls of peace and is always desiring us to feel insecure and dislocated. This is why we need to see Jesus as not only the shepherd but also the guardian of our souls. Listen to how Jesus describes his guardianship work:

<sup>8</sup> All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup> I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. <sup>10</sup> The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

In the Palestine of Jesus' day sheep folds would be made out of stone walls. Often, they had an open entrance and it was the role of the shepherd to lie down in front of the entrance at night in order to guard his sheep. The shepherd was a living door. Jesus says that he will guard our souls from the thief whose modus operandi is to kill and destroy; whereas Jesus comes so that we might have abundant life.

What does such life look like? Well think of Pope Francis and how he is presenting himself to the world. As one commentator observed:

***There are those who delight in describing the Pope as a bold brazen revolutionary, sent to rock the boat. Others think he has come to cause a massive ship-wreck. But the only revolution Pope Francis has inaugurated is a revolution of tenderness. It is this very revolution that is at the heart of soul of Pope Francis' ministry.***

I like this, a revolution of tenderness. This is the very tenderness the Pope himself writes about in *Evangelii Gaudium* (#288)

***Whenever we look to Mary, we come to believe once again in the revolutionary nature of love and tenderness. In her we see that humility and tenderness are not virtues of the weak but of the strong who need not treat others poorly in order to feel important themselves... Mary is able to recognize the traces of God's Spirit in events great and small. She constantly contemplates the mystery of God in our world, in human history and in our daily lives.***

We look to Mary because she always looked to her Son the one who was the shepherd and guardian of her soul too. When it is the Good Shepherd shaping our souls, then with Mary and Pope Francis we can embody in our lives love and tenderness because we know Jesus calls us by name because he is our Good shepherd and protects us from the devil's life denying lies because Jesus is also the guardian of our souls.