

The Directing, Protecting and Nurturing Shepherd

Homily for Easter 4: May 7th 2017

Acts 2:14a, 36–41

Psalm 23:1–6

1 Peter 2:20b–25

John 10:1–10

This is Good Shepherd Sunday when we meditate on Jesus “the Good Shepherd”. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who continues this pastoral work through his bishops, priests and deacons, who tend to the Flock of God, which is now his Universal Church.

In a special way, this Sunday invites us to consider the relationship between Jesus the Good Shepherd and those who serve his Flock as priests. The word “pastor” comes from the Latin word for shepherd. In our reading from 1 Peter Jesus is called the shepherd and guardian of souls. Today I want to talk with you about how priests are called to serve you, the people of God, as shepherds, and guardians, of your souls. I will draw parallels between the Psalm and Gospel reading so that we can better understand why the ministerial priesthood is a particular vocation that is to work with Jesus in directing, protecting and nurturing, the souls of God’s Holy Flock.

David begins this most famous Psalm by celebrating:

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

Now we need to understand this in relation to our souls. The Shepherd God will, if we trust ourselves to him, shepherd and guard our souls, so that throughout this life our souls can experience His directing, protecting and nurturing care and we will not be in want.

The Shepherd’s Directing Care:

First of all let’s think about the Shepherd’s directing care. It is this directing care that is the theme of today’s Collect, where the Church prays:

“Almighty ever-living God, lead us to share the joys of heaven, so that the humble flock may reach where the brave Shepherd has gone before.”¹

We are being directed somewhere, which is ultimately heaven. That which is most essential therefore to the priesthood is this kind of spiritual direction. Jesus has ordained Father Jerome and me priests to assist you in reaching where the brave shepherd has gone before.

¹ Collect for Fourth Sunday of Easter

How does David pray about this directive care?

*He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
3 he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.*

Now a superficial reading of these verses can lead us to conclude, is that ever idyllic. Green pastures, still waters sound more like a Club Med vacation than the Christian vocation. But this is what David wants us to take from this. The Lord is able to lead us in right paths so that we can stay close to him. When David says God will do this for his “name’s sake”, we need to understand that God’s name speaks of the essence of who God is. God’s fundamental name in the Old Testament is “I am”, in Hebrew “Yahweh”. Yahweh is the one who is always present offering his directive care. Jesus took this name to declare at the end of Matthew’s Gospel “I am with you always to the close of the age”. God, says David, is true to his name. He is ever present to us as the “I am”.

So what does David mean when he says God directs him in right paths?

Let me give you a picture of the topography of the land where David in the Psalm and Jesus, in the Gospel, spoke these pastoral words. The main part of Judaea was a central plateau, stretching from Bethel to Hebron for a distance of about fifty-six kilometres, varying from twenty two to twenty seven kilometres across. The ground, for the most part, was rough and stony. Judaea was much more a pastoral than an agricultural country, and it was, therefore, inevitable that the most familiar figure of the Judaeian uplands was the shepherd.

His life was very hard. No flock ever grazed without a shepherd, and he was never off duty. There being little grass, the sheep were bound to wander; and since there were no protecting walls, the sheep had constantly to be watched. On either side of the narrow plateau, the ground dipped sharply down to the craggy deserts, and the sheep were always liable to stray away and get lost. The shepherd’s task was not only constant but also dangerous, for, in addition, he had to guard the flock against wild animals, especially against wolves, and there were always thieves and robbers ready to steal the sheep.

So the green pastures, as you can hear, were few and far between. The environment was hostile to sheep and they could so easily be lead astray. The shepherd’s vigilance was critical.

This is helpful when thinking about the pastoral direction priests are to give today. St. Peter talked in our first reading about the topography our souls have to wander through as “a corrupt generation”. In his letter he described how his readers were going astray but had now returned to the shepherd and guardian of their souls.

In this world we need to all stay close to the Church and her shepherds because the way is indeed narrow that leads to our heavenly home and how easily souls can be lead astray. Priests share in

the pastoral work of direction to help the Lord's precious flock from straying, getting lost, or being stolen by the soul's enemy, the devil.

The Shepherd's Protective Care:

The shepherd's protective care flows from this directive care. David celebrates this quality of care when he prays:

*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.*

The shepherd's equipment was very simple. He had his staff, a short wooden club which had a lump of wood at the end often studded with nails. His staff was the weapon with which he defended himself and his flock against marauding animals and robbers. He had his rod, which was like the shepherd's crook. With it, he could catch and pull back any sheep which was moving to stray away.

So this is another part of pastoral work, to fend off those enemies that would want to harm Jesus' flock.

There is an illustration of this protective pastoral care in Acts 21 where St. Paul is about to leave the Church at Ephesus. To the leaders there he says:

*29 I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.
30 Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them.*

Savage wolves who will distort the truth. Priests are called to be men, who like Jesus, speak the truth in love. In so doing they wield the staff skillfully. Such skillful staff work is so needed today where there is such confusion about who God is and therefore our anthropology, what it means to be human, is becoming so very distorted.

Not only do priests have to protect the flock from this distortion of the truth but also lovingly and tenderly with the rod protect and hold the sheep back from such devouring ideologies.

The Shepherd's Nurturing Care:

In the Psalm we have this famous image that speaks of the shepherd's nurturing care:

*You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;*

Notice where the nurturing care happens, in the presence of the enemies, out there in the open where the wolves want to steal and devour the sheep.

In our Gospel Jesus speaks about his nurturing care this way:

Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.

When the sheep were out on the hills in the warm season and did not return at night to the village at all, they were collected into sheepfolds on the hillside. These hillside sheepfolds were just open spaces enclosed by a wall. In them, there was an opening by which the sheep came in and went out; but there was no door of any kind. What happened was that at night the shepherd himself lay down across the opening, and no sheep could get out or in except over his body. In the most literal sense, the shepherd was the gate. These folds were places of nurture and safety.

Every time we are at Mass we celebrate how Jesus laid down his body for his sheep. Every time a priest celebrates Mass he is sharing with Jesus in this nurturing work. The Mass is the sheepfold. From here, having been nurtured by Jesus the Shepherd, you will then have to go back out into the world. By Jesus' nurturing care we can then affirm with David the words with which the psalm ends:

***Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.***

There is a tenderness and assurance with which David speaks of God here. If you know anything of David's life, he countered many enemies. From without Saul, the Philistines; from within his own self-serving soul; and a family that was best described as disordered chaos. Yet, he knew in the midst of a world that could so easily lead him astray the merciful care of the Shepherd of his Soul.

To be a priest and to serve you the flock of God is an honour, gift and responsibility. For in a very concentrated way a priest's vocation is to tangibly embody the pastoral care of Jesus, described by David as his mercy and goodness of Jesus.

It is my prayer that some boys and young men here today will hear the call of Jesus to consider the call to priesthood. Will you prayerfully consider joining with Jesus in this pastoral work so as to help direct, protect and nurture God's people through this life so that "the humble flock may reach where the brave Shepherd has gone before."