

The Fourth Sunday after Easter

Those comforting words of the Good Shepherd can lull us into such a sense of security that we forget about his listeners at the time and those for whom his words were intended. Jesus had just restored the sight of the man who had been born blind and Jesus' opponents were furious. Jesus had broken the Sabbath law which prohibited healing as well as accusing his opponents of being blind in their self interest and their refusal to believe.

Jesus took his challenge to them further by applying the image of the Good Shepherd with a single flock to himself. The shepherd with a single flock was, in his audience's understanding, the Christ or Messiah, which Jesus was claiming to be.

Palestinian shepherds kept their flocks at night in a common sheepfold with a low wall. They took it in turns to lie across the opening to stop the sheep from straying and to keep an eye out for thieves who might steal the sheep. Thieves would need to use force because the sheep would not follow them if they did not recognise their shepherd's voice. In fact they would destroy and kill.

His opponents in the audience were far from stupid and received the message loud and clear. The strangers and thieves who were out to destroy, they took to be themselves and condemned Jesus as possessed by a devil and were ready to stone him.

Our Easter teaching so far has been about coming to believe in the presence of the risen Jesus in our lives in the here and now. Today's scripture takes that process a stage further and invites us to acknowledge and repent of that resistance to the risen Lord which lurks in our hearts and minds. So in his Pentecost sermon, when his audience were moved by his words, they asked Peter "what must we do?" Peter told them that they must repent and be baptised so that they could receive the Holy Spirit.

Jesus the good shepherd invites us to come to him and receive the gift that he is offering which is life to the full. Before we can do that we must heed Peter's words about repentance and examine ourselves in the light of the way Jesus' opponents saw him. Full of fear that he was upsetting their culture and way of life; challenged at the deepest level to let go of self interest, envy and greed, they reacted angrily when Jesus implied that they were like thieves coming to steal and kill the sheep. Their non-acceptance of him was destructive and not the way to the fullness of human life and could it be true that their resistance to Jesus the good shepherd is alive and well in us? Could it be true that Peter's words about stray sheep are true of us?

Jesus' opponents failed to understand what Jesus was saying. It was fear and uncertainty that blinded them. As Jesus said, they thought that they could see but they deceived themselves. So how could this possibly be true for us? It could begin in that experience of seeing another as a threat; when the gifts of another person or another family or another group seem to be greater. When envy begins to cloud and bring division into our experience of partnership. When we exclude others because we perceive that their contribution to our lives may lead to the loss of something of which we are proud or which gives us comfort. When we cooperate with others in that kind of conversation which gives us a sense of satisfaction because we find another person who will agree with us as we deepen our mutual rejection of someone who challenges us.

This closed attitude and unwillingness to let go has sin at its root and, as Jesus points out, is destructive of life. Our task is to respond in the right way when we feel

that envy, or fear, or threat deepening division in our lives and relationships. And the right way to is entrust our lives to the good shepherd and listen to his voice.

The psalm today reminds us that because the Lord is our shepherd there is nothing we shall want. There is nothing to fear because we abide in him and he guides us, protects us and nourishes us. The repentance, of which Peter speaks, is that readiness to entrust our lives in gratitude to Jesus, in complete confidence that he provides for all our needs because he is the giver of life. There is no need to fear.

There is no need to fear or to be closed to the challenges that life brings because Jesus is the gate, or as he is also described in John's Gospel, the way. His message and teaching, his Holy Spirit and power within us, is the only way to the fullness of life. Clutching at other ways of our own decision or invention is a cruel deception that will not lead to life.

There is no need to fear if we listen to the voice of the good shepherd. It is in prayer that we allow him to call us by name; it is in those promptings which we discern in feelings and hopes, that he leads us in the right direction. It is by listening to his word in the voices of others, in the teaching of the Church and in sacred scripture that we will follow the way he took and come to the fullness of life.