

We are now onto the third Sunday after Easter and the theme for this morning is, "The Good Shepherd." When we think of Jesus using the imagery of a Shepherd various pictures come to our mind. We may have watched many shepherds guiding their sheep either by staying up front and leading them or being behind the flock and goading them into following the right paths.

In the Gospel reading for this morning we notice one of the seven "I AM" sayings where Jesus claims himself to be the Good Shepherd. He then goes on to define what the good shepherd does. He says the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. He is more concerned about his own life than about his sheep. Whereas the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

When Jesus says the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep he is talking about the sacrificial love of the shepherd for his sheep. The key factor in this is love. The shepherd loves the sheep to such an extent that even if it means to give up his life in order to save his sheep, he would do so. A story is told about a shepherd in Villupuram, near Chennai when a shepherd was grazing his flock near a railway track. When he saw an approaching train on the tracks and that many of his sheep were still in between the tracks he ran after them and chased them from the oncoming train. In the end thirty sheep and the shepherd died. If an ordinary human being can show so much of love for his sheep how much more will God love us?

Jesus says, "I know my sheep and my sheep know me- just as the Father knows me and I know the Father-- and I lay down my life for the sheep." Jesus reminds us that he knows each one of us by name. Like a good shepherd he will know if any one of us have strayed and will call us by name to come back to him. The great Psalmist David penned down the famous Psalm, "The Lord is my Shepherd" knowing what a Shepherd's role was, as he himself was one of them. Jesus says that he has to bring in other sheep that do not belong to him as yet. By this he means that there are others who need to hear the good news about his birth, life, death, resurrection and his coming again. These sheep also needed to know that Jesus would give them the forgiveness of sins and life eternal. When people respond to this they too will become part of the flock and Jesus will be their good shepherd.

Jesus reminds the people that he was laying down his life on his own accord and that he will take it up again. By this he was referring to his death and resurrection. The Jews who were gathered around him did not want to be in suspense said, "If you are the Messiah tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I did tell you but you did not believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify about me but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hands." Jesus reminds the Jews that they were losing their salvation because they refused to believe in Jesus as the good shepherd.

Jesus reminds us again this morning that he is the good shepherd who has the right to forgive our sins and to give us eternal life because he has laid down his life for us. We are called to receive what the good shepherd has offered us. When we do, we are safe and secure in his arms. No matter how much the evil one may try to snatch us we will rest secure in him. May God help us stand firm and put our trust in the Good Shepherd.