

Easter 2

I take as my text today from St. Peter's first general letter:

For ye were as sheep gone astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable unto Thee, O Lord, my Strength and my redeemer.

Today, we celebrate **Good Shepherd Sunday** typically an Anglican celebration. The Epistle and Gospel appointed for today, along with the Morning Prayer lesson, complement each other in carrying forward this theme of Jesus Christ as the **Good Shepherd**.

Indeed, the Morning Prayer lesson from St. John, verses 1 thru 10 of the 10th chapter, leads into the Gospel, which continues with verses 11 through 16.

Each of the readings for today take a different aspect of the **Good Shepherd** theme.

In the verses from St. John for **Morning Prayer**, our Lord focuses on the door to the sheepfold through which the sheep pass at morning and night. It is the sheepfold wherein they find protection from the wolves and other predators, including thieves.

The porter, or gatekeeper of the sheepfold, opens the door only to the shepherd and when the sheep hear him call to them, they follow him out because they recognize his voice, and it is to his voice they respond, not to other shepherds or strangers.

Oftentimes, the shepherd would also be the door to the sheepfold where he would lie down and sleep at night.

The two passages — the one from **Morning Prayer** and the one for the Gospel — complete the picture of the **Good Shepherd** who not only leads the sheep into the pastures, but more importantly protects the sheep and becomes the portal through which they pass.

Indeed, the Epistle passage from 1st St. Peter sheds light on the other readings. Taken in the context of the time when it was written, the passage from Peter, as do all the Epistle readings during Eastertide, concerns itself with the character of Christian witness in an environment fraught with hostility and the threat of persecution. As St. Peter said:

For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.

Even the *Collect*, composed specifically for the 1549 Prayer Book, serves to focus our attention on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for our redemption and the example he set forth in his life, which, in turn, draws our attention to a relationship easily demonstrated in human terms.

That relationship is the one that exists between a shepherd and his sheep.

First, we must understand that the sending of his Son was a **gift** for our redemption. Furthermore, God's Son serves as an example for us of the kind of life we are expected to live. Even more, if we are truly thankful for this great **Gift**, thankful for the sacrifice and example set before us, then we will endeavor to follow in the way of his Life, a life of self-sacrifice, love, and service.

Moreover, in his example, we find an analogy that can be applied, not only to our relationship to God, but also to the Church with its members, and to each Christian, whether it be within the relationship of the family, or within society.

In turning to the concept of the *Good Shepherd*, the readings appointed for this Sunday cause us to focus on just what **IS** a *Good Shepherd*, and some of the nuances that elevate the concept to divine revelation.

Throughout the **Old Testament** and into the **New Testament**, God has revealed himself as a *Shepherd* and the Hebrew people as his Sheep.

We know all too well that sheep are capricious, and require constant watching to keep them from going astray, from wandering all over the place. Yet, sheep, under the watchful eye of their shepherd, find comfort and protection from the dangers of the world around them.

With a good shepherd, a relationship develops between the sheep and shepherd. He watches over them, keeps them together, and affords them protection. He leads them safely from pasture to pasture, and into the sheepfold. The shepherd lies before the opening into the sheepfold, becoming, in effect, the door through which the sheep must pass; he becomes the door that keeps out predators and thieves, those who would kill the sheep or steal them away from the flock.

We find in the analogy of the sheep and the shepherd, the difference between a shepherd who is dedicated to the sheep because they are his, and the shepherd who is hired to watch over the sheep.

Here, the analogy turns into a lesson of love and of sacrifice.

God as the **Shepherd** of our souls defines our relationship to him in the most direct way: we are his and dependent on him, and in return, he lovingly cares for us and protects us. God is ceaselessly vigilant. His love is self-sacrificing. In the words of Psalm 100: ***We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.***

Not only is God the **Shepherd**, but he is also the **Bishop** of our souls. The word bishop comes from the Greek *episcopos*, that means protector, guide, or guardian.

As our **Bishop**, God is our protector and guide, our guardian.

Taken together, **Shepherd** and **Bishop** of our souls, we can come to realize that God in his power protects us, and in his wisdom guides us in the right way.

We are sheep, not because we are lacking in God's eyes, but because we are so dependent on him whether we acknowledge it or not.

So often, we human beings fail to realize our true dependence on God; indeed, many people are quick to deny any dependence on anyone or anything other than themselves, even to the point of denying the very existence of God, or even supposing that humankind being superior in all of creation, are equal with God if not gods themselves.

We Christians know better. As our Lord has said, and as St. Peter has presented to us in his Epistle: we are called to be servants just as our Saviour was a Servant; and we are to be an example to the world, just as Jesus was an example for us to follow.

That, says Peter, is our *Christian Duty*.

Peter introduces us to a new attitude toward our relationships with each other, and toward our work as Christians. It is a radical departure from life in the Roman world of his time; indeed, it's radical even for our time.

When we become Christians, we enter into a new relationship with God and our fellow human beings, a new relationship that, in essence, makes us aliens in this world.

It will not always be easy for us. We will be required to look at the world differently; we will be required to view relationships differently; and we will be challenged to abandon some of our habits and secular ways.

Christ was seen as the Suffering Servant, and we, as servants of Christ, are to follow in his steps. He was perfect; we can only attain to that perfection.

As we undertake the perfecting of ourselves for Christ, we take on a new attitude: the attitude that whatever we do, in word or deed, everything must be done in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. That even extends to our very thoughts.

In the *Christian Ideal*, whatever we do is done, not for ourselves, but for God. It is done out of love. It is done out of conviction. Whatever we do must be done so as to be able to show it to God without shame.

Most certainly, in our efforts to be true to our convictions, we will inevitably be subject to insult and injury. The measure of our faith in Jesus Christ will be how well we accept insult and injury without complaining, steadfast in our unfailing love of God, and with unfailing love in our hearts for all of His creation.

Yet, in all of this, we have a certain confidence in that greater relationship with God, a relationship that is so wonderfully expressed in the concept of the Good Shepherd.

From the Psalms of David, we find this so beautifully expressed in the 23rd Psalm: ***The Lord is my Shepherd.*** It is probably one of most well-known and remembered passages in the Bible. When coupled with that most familiar verse, John 3:16, ***So God loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life,*** we can draw comfort in knowing how dear, how precious we each are in the sight of God.

Though we may be as sheep who go astray, requiring a divine **Shepherd** to watch over and care for us, through the **Incarnation** of Jesus Christ, we have also been elevated to become joint-heirs with Christ to the ***Kingdom of Heaven.***

Jesus Christ is our **Shepherd**, our **Redeemer**, our **Example**; he is the **Door** through which we must pass to enter into our inheritance.

The example our Lord has given us to follow is love and service: loving and serving God; loving and serving our fellow human beings in whatever capacity we are able, as God has called us to do, by the help of his grace freely given.