

Easter 2

I take as my text today, from St. John's Gospel:

JESUS said, I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.

“Let the words of my mouth and the mediation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.”

We celebrate today, on this the Second Sunday after Easter, what has become known, throughout the Anglican Church, as Good Shepherd Sunday. This is because of the shepherd theme common to both the Epistle and Gospel appointed for today, as well as in the second lesson for Morning Prayer that we also read also from St. John's Gospel.

John's Gospel beautifully describes the relationship of Jesus Christ to the Church, laying the foundation of the relationship of the bishop to the Church, and through him the priests, deacons, and lay leadership, as they perform the various functions of their offices.

Jesus says, ***I am the Good Shepherd.***

But what is a good shepherd? Certainly, each of us has a vision of what a shepherd is, even what a good shepherd must be.

We can imagine those ancient days when Jesus walked through the countryside of Palestine where shepherds would be seen tending their flocks, not always in what we might envision as lush green pastures, for the terrain then, even today, was oftentimes rocky and dry.

Though we may think of a shepherd in simplistic terms, the requirements of a shepherd went far beyond just standing watch over a flock of sheep grazing on a hillside.

In tending his flock, the shepherd protects them from wolves and other wild animals; he protects them from the dangers of the elements; and he endures the hardships with his flock, wind, rain, cold, sleet, snow, often putting his life in jeopardy to protect them.

I can remember some years ago in Turkey, seeing shepherds on cold, rainy days, as night approached, standing watch, some armed with only a staff, others with a rifle slung over their shoulders. They would remain close to their sheep, calling to them, watching over them.

Inevitably, over time, a bond develops between the shepherd and the sheep. They come to trust him and will follow him wherever he leads them. I have even watched as a flock of sheep followed their shepherd through the streets of a village, not one straying from the entourage, all in a straight line, traffic coming to a standstill to allow them to pass.

What we are describing here is not unlike what St. John is depicting as the good shepherd, one who will even give his life for those entrusted to his care.

Yet, there are other shepherds who view the flock in a much different light. John refers to them as the hireling. The hireling appears to be a good shepherd but lacks commitment, and, though he may do a good job, there is that point when he abandons the flock to their fate.

Thus, we can begin to see the traits of a good shepherd — commitment, compassion, endurance, and love; yes, love, for the shepherd even develops affection for his flock as their protector and guardian. This is something simple, yet beautiful, that we can perceive when we see a shepherd in the fields watching over his flock.

But, when Jesus says *I am the Good Shepherd*, the meaning goes far beyond our normal perception of the shepherd watching over his flock, even going beyond our perception of goodness, for that Goodness which Jesus reflects is that which, in a moral sense, is beautiful, noble and true. He is the perfection of all attributes of the shepherd who is ideally good.

*...I am the good shepherd; and know my sheep...*the Perfect, Ideal Shepherd, fulfilling the Greek term often found in the Old Testament applied to Jehovah.

Indeed, it is from Ezekiel that the Good Shepherd becomes the title of the Messiah.

As the Good Shepherd, not only does Jesus know His sheep but they know Him. Just as sheep come to know their shepherd, his voice, his actions, and respond; so, we, bearing the mark of His divine ownership through baptism, know Him; and through His perfect knowledge, He knows each of us intimately and from Him nothing is hid.

I know my sheep and am known of mine.

In prophetic tones, Jesus goes on to say, *....and I lay down my life for the sheep.* This He does willingly. The sacrifice, although desired by God, is voluntary, and as such is accepted, freely made, obedient even to the Cross.

The Roman soldiers who crucified Jesus did not take His life from Him; He gave His life for His sheep, absolutely self-determined and voluntary. At that final moment on the cross, He dismissed His spirit: "Into thy hands I commend my spirit."

He is *the Propitiation, not for our sins only, but for those of the whole world*. He died and rose again giving His life in ransom for sinners in triumph over death; having sacrificed His life, He can offer eternal life to all who believe in Him.

The Good Shepherd protects His sheep. But what about the hireling? Committed as he may seem, his interest in the sheep is superficial. It's a job and there are limits to what one does for pay. If there is no love, there is no sacrifice.

If we look at the portion of John's Gospel appointed for Morning Prayer, we find yet another aspect of our Lord as the shepherd, that of the door to the sheepfold.

Then said Jesus unto them again, Verily, verily, I say unto you, I am the door of the sheep.

All that ever came before me are thieves and robbers: but the sheep did not hear them.

I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.

I am the door. This statement has far-reaching significance for us as Christians. Christ is the door through which we have access to the Father; He is the door into a new life; He is the door through which we attain salvation.

In the context of the passage from John, we must not think of a door in the typical sense. For shepherds in the eastern world, the door was actually an opening in the walled enclosure where the sheep were kept at night.

Once the sheep passed through the narrow opening, a porter or door-keeper would take over the responsibility for the sheep. This porter would be alert to thieves and robbers who might try to enter the sheepfold either through the door or by climbing over the walls.

There is a story that I've related several times of Sir George Adam Smith, a theologian, telling of his travels in the Far East and the time he came upon one of the sheepfolds.

Sir George asked a nearby shepherd:

"Is that a fold for the sheep?"

"Oh yes," the shepherd replied.

"I see only one way in," said Sir George.

"Yes, there it is, there is the door," replied the shepherd, pointing to the opening in the wall.

"But there is no door there," said Sir George.

"Oh, I am the door."

Sir John asked the shepherd:

"What do you mean by calling yourself the door?" To which the shepherd replied,

"The sheep go inside, and I come there and lie down across the threshold, and no sheep can get out except over my body, and no wolf can get in except over me."

That in itself illustrates quite beautifully the role of Christ as the Door: Jesus preserves and protects His sheep; the ravaging wolf can not reach us who are Christ's sheep except across His Body.

And it ties together the whole concept of Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd and we as His flock. Indeed, He has already given His life for us.

Even now, His staff is ever ready to pull us back into the fold when we stray; His love for us is so great that He will seek us out when we are lost and carry us back; He is never far from us.

With the events of Holy Week, the joyful discovery of Easter Morning, and the days that followed, we are forever reminded of the sacrifice of the Good Shepherd and the very fact that we are members of His Flock, recipients of His Love, and always within the range of His Voice, if only we believe and listen with our hearts.

As the shepherd, He is also the door and through Him, through this Door, is the entrance into life eternal.

I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.