

Trinity III

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“Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost.”

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

Amen.

The Liturgy this morning provides for our contemplation two symbols taken from the animal world, the lion and the lamb: creatures which, by their very natures, stand in stark contrast to each other. In first century Palestine, wild beasts often roamed about the countryside—a plague to farmers and a terror to those whose habitation or livelihood was found beyond the safe confines of city walls. When venturing into the wilderness, one had to be particularly aware of this ever-present danger—sober, and vigilant—lest a lion break in and destroy cattle, sheep, or men. Because of the great terror associated with the untamed desert, men of ancient times viewed the wilderness as not only a place of ferocious beasts, but also a haven for demons, unclean spirits, and malevolent gods. One did not journey into such environs lightly.

Yet, it was in these very places where one of the most difficult, but necessary, occupations of the ancient world found its locus: that of the shepherd. Our modern, sanitized conception of pastoral

life often envisions a peaceful, bucolic field, lush with green grass and quietly grazing sheep, the shepherd lazily wandering through his flock, gently goading the animals with his crook. Anybody who has lived on a farm knows this is far from reality, but even contemporary provincial life is vastly removed from the danger and anxiety of first-century shepherding. For shepherds in those days, the responsibility towards one's flock was total and unending. Threats were constant: whether from thieves, serpents, lions, or brambles, necessitating a perpetual, sleepless vigilance lest at any time an animal should be lost. Thus it is within this context that Our Lord tells his parable this morning.

“What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?” To us, living in the light of Christian love, there is no question of the Good Shepherd sacrificing himself for the sheep; but for those in Christ's time, it was not at all self-evident that a shepherd might abandon his flock to go after an errant lamb. Indeed, it could very well prove disastrous for the entire flock, and in many cases it would be more advantageous to the shepherd to cut his losses and write off the missing sheep as not worth the risk necessary to recover it. Of course, as is often the case in Our Lord's parables, the unexpected happens: the shepherd, representing Christ, goes into the wilderness to seek out the lamb who had gone astray, which we

have all been taught represents every one of us. He restores it to the flock, and there is much rejoicing. “I once was lost, but now am found,” as the popular hymn says. This is a perfectly fine and legitimate interpretation of the parable, and it is a beautiful portrait of God’s love for each of us, but it is not the whole story.

For you see, the real pasture in this parable is the Eden of paradise, where our parents Adam and Eve, lacking nothing for their provision or their happiness, were tended by the strong hand of God. But into their midst came a lion, flattering them with words of deceit, promising that they could become like God—not by divine grace, but by their own wills, by their own pride. They were not sober and vigilant, nor did they—steadfast in the faith—resist that lion, the devil. And thus were they torn from their most precious possession, and flung out into the wilderness, to make their habitation amongst the demons and wicked spirits. The whole human race, as a result of the death and sin introduced by Adam and Eve, was not merely *lost*, wandering in a spiritual desert; but, as the Greek word our Lord actually used in this parable suggests, humanity was destroyed, perished—dead, totally incapable of ever restoring itself to life: “by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men.”

Yet scarcely had this catastrophe happened in Paradise, when the all-penetrating love of God began to reveal itself. A lamb out of the great flock of God’s creation had fallen prey to the lion, and the

Shepherd makes himself ready to seek it out. The entire narrative of the Old Testament is the voice of that Shepherd crying in the wilderness for the lost sheep. But the sheep is caught in the jaws of the lion, and is powerless to respond. So the Good Shepherd leaves behind the heavenly glory of his divine pasture, and goes forth to make war against that demonic lion that has stolen away his lamb. He baits the lion with his own Blood, ensnares it with his Cross, and journeys into the depths of hell itself to find that lamb. He raises it up, carrying it rejoicing into the celestial sheepfold. There, he refreshes that lamb with the still waters of baptism, anoints its head with the oil of the Holy Ghost, and prepares a Eucharistic table where he nourishes his lamb with his own flesh. The sheep that was lost and perished by the envy of the devil is now found and restored to life by the infinite mercy of the Good Shepherd. This is the Gospel.

The lost sheep is not only me or only you, but is the whole human race descended from Adam, subject to the death wrought by his transgression—a transgression committed through a deception perpetrated by the devil. Adam's fall was not out of malice, but out of weakness. And thus when God goes to find that lost sheep, it is not because the sheep desired it or deserved it, but because God in his compassionate love would not allow his creation to be devoured by the devil. And notice what the Shepherd does when he finds the sheep: he does not punish it, he

does not drive it forcefully back to the fold, but he places it upon his shoulder, and—carrying it gently—reunites it to the flock.¹ “Ye have not chosen me,” says Our Lord, “but I have chosen you.” “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us.” *This* is mercy. St. Paul says in the 11th chapter of Romans, that “God hath concluded all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all.”

And so, St. Peter counsels us today to be clothed with humility. Why? Simply put, because every gift given to us, most especially our salvation, is entirely a result of God’s mercy. “Humble yourselves,” therefore, “under the mighty hand of God,” for “he is loving to every man”; and “his mercy,” which “endureth forever,” is “over all his works”.

In light of this, I think it no coincidence that during this month, the Church and the modern World place before us two conflicting paths. You see, the month of June has long been dedicated by the Church to the Sacred Heart of Our Lord; that is, to the contemplation of the immense love of God that led him to take human flesh, to suffer with us even to the point of death, and to liberate us from the powers of Satan and sin. The Sacred Heart represents the mercy of the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep; who, as he is being nailed to a Cross, extends unasked forgiveness to men committing in ignorance the gravest

¹ St. Gregory of Nyssa

crime in all history. The Sacred Heart reveals the profound humility of God.

But in recent times, the month of June has been given over by the world to the celebration of “pride”. What may have begun as some sort of equal rights movement has now become an all-embracing bacchanalia not simply of Individualism or Freedom, but of a triumph of the will. *My truth, my choice, my dignity, my desire.* It is the complete opposite of the example given by the Son of God, “who humbled himself,” taking the form of man, emptying himself of every divine prerogative that he might restore his fallen creation. Pride, in any form, is forbidden to the Christian, and is actively resisted by God. Even in those areas we may deceptively assure ourselves are merited—our careers, our families, our nation, our social or economic accomplishments. These may be good things, but they come to us entirely by God’s providence, and no Christian may take pride in any of it. But most especially, we can take no pride in our salvation. We are saved entirely by the merciful heart of Our Lord, an act of gratuitous love towards a human race incapable of liberating itself from the bonds of death.

“God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ, and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places...And this is not your own

doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” Pride is a disease for which mercy is the cure.

“Among all God’s actions,” St. Isaac of Syria tells us, “there is none which is not entirely a matter of mercy, love, and compassion: these alone constitute the beginning and the ending of all God’s dealings with us.” And so this morning, as we prepare to come before the Altar to receive the Medicine of Immortality, let us be humbled before the mercy of God that frees us from ourselves; the mercy that is the selfless, uncompelled kindness of Christ towards his whole creation, without exception. Let us pray to be merciful as he is merciful. And let us rest on the shoulders of the Good Shepherd as he carries us home.

Amen.