

Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd!"

He then goes on to say that his sheep know him, and they listen to him! He is telling this to his disciples and if he says he is the shepherd, then what does that make them? What does that make us?

Sheep!

This is a very interesting image that Jesus paints for the people of the time and we may not always appreciate some of the things about this image that people did then. It was challenging for two reasons.

First, although we have an image of Christ the Shepherd in our minds, dressed in a long robe and carrying a curved staff like a bishop and the lost lamb on his shoulders... quite noble really, that wasn't what the people of Jerusalem would have thought.

You see, Shepherds were a rough and tumble bunch. Their clothes were ragged and their staff often had a pointed end to keep wolves away. They lived out in the fields with the sheep, they didn't get to wash very often and they probably smelled worse than the sheep did.

They rarely went to the synagogue to pray because they would be ritually unclean from handling the animals and couldn't take the time to do the ritual cleansing required because there was often no one to watch the sheep.

The people would look down their noses at them and wouldn't associate with them, even though they did an essential job, because they didn't do the nice things expected by society.

It's a bit like being a sanitation worker, who has to work on Sunday and can't come to church, and whose hands and clothes get dirty and even though we expect our toilets and our plumbing to keep working, we tend not to associate with the men and women who do these and many other essential but unattractive jobs because they're not quite nice.

So it was a bit shocking to hear Jesus call himself a shepherd. Imagine if Jesus came in here this morning and said, "I am the good Roto-rooter man!"

Then secondly, he calls his followers sheep. This is not a very good move if you want people to like you. Imagine if I said, "You people are all a bunch of sheep!"

It's not very likely that we would say to ourselves, "Isn't that nice, I'm a sheep, and that means I am a good Christian!" No, it's much more likely that we would think that it was an insult because we tend to think of sheep as not very bright, no mind of their own, they do what they're told without thinking. These are not qualities we want to be known for because the world prizes individuality and independence above everything.

So why did Jesus go there?

Like any good story, he was trying to get to one key idea that people could understand and apply to themselves.

In this case, he was trying to show the people that even though Shepherds were hard to be around they could still be good and even though sheep weren't very smart, they were smart enough to know their master and to listen to his voice.

Some of the things that Jesus was teaching his people were not easy to listen to, they went against many comfortable traditions, they challenged the people to repent and change. But all of these things that he taught us, he taught us because he loved us, and he was willing to die for us to back them up, to show us that even in dying he would triumph again.

So that leaves us with the question, "Do we recognize Jesus as the Shepherd? As the master?" And if we do, do we listen to his voice? Please notice, Jesus doesn't say, the sheep hear his voice, no, he says they listen to his voice! That's a big difference.

Far too often, we come here to church and we hear the words being spoken by our shepherds but we don't listen to them. Jesus isn't calling us sheep because he thinks we should be mindless followers, but so that we can say to ourselves, "If even a sheep can listen, then surely so can we!"

Because once we understand that it is the fact that we are called on to listen to what Jesus teaches, then we understand that he expects a lot from us, especially the repenting and changing part.

Jesus doesn't think of us as sheep but as his brothers and sisters, children of the same Father in heaven. He tells us that we are precious to him and because we are privileged to be loved by him, the least we can do is listen as well as a lowly sheep.

If we listen, that means we have to try to figure out what the words we are hearing mean. We won't be able to really understand them unless we spend some time thinking about them, and not just an hour in church on Sunday, but finding some quiet time during the week to go over the words of the gospel again in our hearts and figure out how they can be applied in our lives, and make no mistake, every gospel reading can be applied to each one of our lives, every one, every week.

The application may be different for you than for me, but it is there for us all, and all of us who listen to his voice are called to find the way to make his words come true.

Today Jesus' voice tells us of the "unpopular" shepherd to remind us that, like a shepherd, he will lay down his life for us, and we too are called to look at how we can

sacrifice for others around us who may depend on us in the same way the sheep depend on the shepherd.

There is no question that someone is depending on you to put aside your own concerns for a moment and sacrifice for them. It may be a member of our own family that needs us, it may be a friend at school or a colleague or employee at work who needs us to look at their problem first even though it may be the last thing we want to deal with.

It may be a stranger we haven't met yet, but Jesus is depending on us to be ready and if we have listened to his voice, then we will be ready when that person who needs us comes into our life.

Listen to Jesus' voice and take the time to understand and act on it. Acting takes courage sometimes and the best way to have the strength and courage you need is to come up and receive communion.

Take advantage of that very sacrifice that Jesus spoke about in the gospel to have him live in your heart. You see, when he speaks of taking up his life again, he takes it up through you and through me, living as part of us in the Eucharist, so that we can act as he would have acted.

The good shepherd calls us to know him, to listen to him, to understand him, and then to act like him.

Very simple really, even a sheep could follow that.

- Deacon Steve