

St Pius & St Anthony 4th Easter Sunday Year B Homily

The Lord is our Shepherd (Psalm 23) and our gospel reminds us of how good a Shepherd (John 10) we have in Christ! Jesus describes how close He is to His sheep (he knows them by name and they all know his voice-vs 14 and that he leads them all as one flock—even those ‘other’ sheep some may not know- vs 16), yet most repeatedly in these short eight verses today He mentions 5 times that The Good Shepherd ‘lays it down’ (vs 11, 15, 17-18a & 18 b) referring to His willingness to sacrifice himself for His sheep. Now that is a shepherd who sees His own life in His sheep! Jesus does that- He unites his life to His sheep. We had seen a ‘pretty good’ (Not Best) example of such in the Old Testament with great shepherd-king David, who did risk himself, as he says in 1 Samuel 17:34-36 to Saul “*Your servant used to tend his father’s sheep, and whenever a lion or bear came to carry off a sheep from the flock, I would chase after it, attack it, and snatch the prey from its mouth....even killing a lion and bear once...*” While David maybe risked His life, he did not actually die for his own, but in Jesus we do have just that – A shepherd who gives His own life to preserve and save His sheep. Jesus tells us in Matthew 20:28, that he came “not to be served but to serve and to **give his life as a ransom for many.**” He accepted death and gave Himself to ransom us from death. (Yet, I have to emphasize about our Shepherd that Jesus understands us – He knows us so well, because He is the Shepherd who so identified with us that He became a Lamb, as John Bpt says “Behold the Lamb of God” (Jn 1:29, 36)

If we wanted to know how different a saving leader Jesus was from other examples from the Bible, we can find out easily enough in the Old Testament where God points out poor examples of shepherds in Ezekiel 34 to highlight how different His Son is. (God says there, ‘I myself will shepherd my people’ it got so bad. In Ezekiel 34:2-3 God says about the poor example of shepherds ‘*You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals,*’ So imagine for a minute how the OT shepherds exploited their sheep, taking their milk cheese, taking away their wool and yes even eating the sheep themselves. But exactly THERE, notice how different Jesus is in that he does not feast on His sheep, but He rather *He feeds His sheep with His own life (We call that ‘Eucharist’)*. They, that is us, feast on Him, just as He told us at the Last supper (John 6) to ‘Take this all of you and eat, this is my body.’ And we do, and by our receiving His life, we are united to Him and He feeds/leads us. So, yes, we know Jesus’ voice, and we actually follow/do what He tells us, in memory of Him. So today gives us a great opportunity to reflect upon what a saving shepherd we have in Jesus and to thank, praise and serve Him for it in this Holy Eucharist of His Body & Blood.

Thinking of the sacrificial act of leading and giving one’s life to & for his/her subjects made me think of a wonderful teacher I had many years ago when I was in a chaplain training program up in Indianapolis. I was interned at Psychiatric Hospital on the IUPUI campus, and my mentor on the unit (*who also taught us students humility*

because he often said the only difference between us and the patients was the grace of God and that we had keys), He was a great leader. He was very respected by both staff and patients. Well, my shepherd story about him came once when we were taking many of the unit residents to a one day camp retreat at a lake north of Indy. It was a day of building confidence-teamwork games, and time to help the residents get in touch with natural rhythms and the outdoors (and wow what wondrous differences I saw in the patients from them on the unit floor and then being outdoors). But the day was ending after including canoeing and an affirmation campfire, with what He called a night hike. So we started out walking and we walked pretty much single file, with a front man-Him and a rear guard too (they had the only lights but were off). Mostly we walked by the moonlight and it was all through pretty open woods/fields. And yet, as we walked along we suddenly heard joining in our company was some roaming dogs (or so we thought?) All in all they didn't sound vicious, really growling/snarling at us but they were curious enough to come close and grunt or verbally test us out with noises. It was enough to scare/spook the whole group; yet I remember Carl's leadership about keeping the group calm by continuing to talk Himself (His repetitive voice-giving instructions). He detailed every step and what we were going to do.... He said, 'Everyone keep together, I will leave the lights off but keep your hands held to each other and fan out just a little (don't separate, he said-they'll pick off a wandering single sheep) but hold together with a wider front, and the dogs may back away unsure of what they are confronting'. And to make the long story short, yes, we walked out of there, through it and back to our camp unharmed. That was a shepherd. He led us. He was out front facing the threat first, but also assuring, comforting and feeding the sheep in his tow. Or how does Psalm 23 say it, "Even though i walk through the valley of shadow of death, I fear no evil, you are at my side..." Now we were really glad that everyone made it back to the city, but I think we were more glad about his shepherding and the fact that our flocking together was even stronger than any threat. (Which also calls to mind the sense of Jesus' one time parable about the 100 sheep, when the shepherd only goes off to seek out that one single, because of his confidence in knowing the other 99 will remain as one together- that there's strength/protection in numbers (Matt 18:12). Yet, that is our shepherd Jesus – He gives us His life, He 'lays it down' and does so willingly. I hear him clearly when he emphasizes at the end of today's reading, about 'laying it down to take it up again'. He is saying that no one 'makes' Him love us so much. He accepts all His suffering and even death out of love for us – I like how my brother preachers say this "It was not the nails (or coercion of the soldiers) that held Jesus on that cross, it was His love that accepted/embraced it for our good and for our salvation. Again, that is a sacrificial and saving leader. And we are thankful to be known and counted among His flock every week in this sacrament of His feeding us!