

Easter 2-Good Shepard Sunday

Here what our Lord says; "I am the good Shepard: the good Shepard lays down his life for his sheep." This day I bring you greetings in the name of our Good Shepard, the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who for our redemption, laid down His life for each and every one of us. AMEN.

In a recent conversation with a radio commentator, I tried to explain to him the significance of Easter and why Christmas, although the holiest day in the retail season, is not the holiest day of the Christian year. In fact, although we glory in the resurrection of our Lord and the fact that those of us who die in Him will live again with Him, it is indeed the sacrifice of our Lord upon the cross that bears the most significance for us.

Here in an act of supreme love for all of us, He allowed Himself to be led to the cross and through a painful manner of death, provided all of us the redemption of our sins and the gift of salvation through His grace. Many people, including many Christians, have a great deal of trouble understanding this. We prefer to find the joy in the empty cross rather than acknowledge the brutal beating and slaying of our Lord at Calvary. It leads me to wonder sometimes if we truly understand the depth of God's love for us. We cannot understand the glory of the empty cross on Easter, without first understanding the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross on Good Friday.

In the Gospel reading, we see that Christ, using the example of the good Shepard, was trying to explain to His followers the relationship between Himself and those who have come to believe on Him. Sheep are really a great analogy because they are easy to lead, tend to be very trusting, and in most cases never realize the dangers that can befall them. Our Lord tells us that as the Shepard of our flock, that there is a real and caring relationship between Him and all of us. The passage highlights that Christ is willing to do anything to look after us. He is our protector; He nourishes us, cares for our needs, keeps us from danger and fights for us against the evil one. The bond that grows up between the Shepard and his flock is one of total and absolute caring on the part of the Shepard and total and absolute trust on the part of the flock. He tries to tell us that he never deserts us, never turns from us, seeks us out when we go astray, and comforts us in our trials and tribulations. This is the reality of our life in Christ.

While some may relegate the life of Christ to a 2,000 year old legend, those of us who have Christ in our lives understand our relationship is with a living God, one who is always there for us to call upon, and one who is always there even when we are too busy to connect with Him. A life with Christ is one of total and complete trust, one that demands a committed faith and one that calls upon us to submit ourselves to Him and to allow Him to lead our lives. That is a very tough thing for mankind to do, for our own desires; selfishness and egos too often get in the way.

"Sheep are dumb," I heard a person say once. "If Christians are to be like sheep and blindly follow this unseen God, then they are equally dumb." Are we? There is no shortage of gods in our world. Power, money, religions that follow some new age way to find peace, or the worst of all, the belief that man is the end all of everything, that we should be the center of our own lives and that we are to depend upon no one but ourselves. For some odd reason, we often find it easier to accept these beliefs of the world than what God puts before us.

In my weekly Bible class, we had studied the letters of St. Paul, and we have seen over and over again the same message. God saves us by His grace, freely given. We who believe have the gift of eternal life and redemption of our sins, and that we are justified by our faith. In one of those spirit filled moments, a wonderful older lady turned to us and said "Seems really simple doesn't it? I wonder why people find this so difficult." Perhaps it's because it is about putting our trust in something besides ourselves, or perhaps because we have allowed too much to lead us astray.

There is a clear warning for us in the Gospel today, to be wary not only of the wolf, but also of the hireling. He seems to care for the sheep, but yet he falters when danger approaches. In the story, Jesus was talking about the religious leaders of His day but the message is as pertinent now as it was then. Sheep are easily led, and will often follow a path that leads them into danger. The ways of the world, the so-

called prophets of our time, even some of the leaders of the church carried away by their own self importance or their desire to justify the desires of man in their efforts, draw huge followings. They are not reliable; they do not care for their flocks as our Lord did. They fall away when confronted. What real truth do they offer in all that they say or ask us to believe?

Who among them ever laid down his life for the benefit of all mankind? No one. Yet we continue to search, to wander off, to seek new answers in the wisdom of TV talk shows or self-help books. Those lost souls do not understand the truth that life is about our personal relationship with Jesus Christ and nothing else. Christ gives us everything we need.

That is what our Lord tries to explain in the story of the Good Shepard that no greater love hath someone than to lay down his life for his friend. Christ is our friend, He is our Shepard and His love for us was demonstrated upon the cross in His willingness to lay down His life for the redemption of mankind.

We often wonder about the crucifixion. Why was this horrible death on the cross so necessary? God gave His chosen people a manner to show their love and respect for Him through the sacrifice of animals, chosen from the best among their flocks. Through this sacrifice, the sins of those offering those animals would be redeemed. This was the means that God gave His people to maintain their relationship with Him. A way to express their devotion.

Yet God understood that man could not be faithful. That he would continue to sin and separate himself from God. So He brought forth His own son to be the perfect sacrifice for our sins. Here in this one act of cruelty by man, all of our sins have been redeemed.

It is a difficult thing for persons without faith to comprehend that in this one act of supreme love for all mankind, God's only son laid down His own life for each one of us. It is an example of perfect devotion that has endured for 2,000 years. It is an act that still moves us, still inspires us, still provides for us the truth of God's desire that we should all have the promise of eternal life with Him.

More than anything, it should be our desire to be among His flock. That we should commit ourselves to follow Him blindly with total trust through our uncompromising faith. We should also understand, that like the Good Shepard, He will care for us and look after our welfare no matter what the world or life throws at us. It is not our earthly lives that should concern us, but our heavenly lives. God will always see us through and give us peace and comfort. That is what makes Christianity different than any other religion. It gives us hope.

We live in a world that tries to homogenize all of our beliefs and in an attempt to be politically correct. We are told we need to recognize all concepts and beliefs as valid. Often we see what Christians believe, what is given us in scripture and what we hold dear, under assault. It's OK to mock Christ in our cartoons and television shows, but we must never offend a Muslim by showing an image of Mohammad or make fun of Buddha because he is a tad overweight.

We as Christians have been set upon by the wolves of the world and have allowed ourselves to be led astray by the hirelings. "No one comes to the Father except by me," our Lord tells us in Scripture. All roads do not lead to God. We must never forget that. Our Good Shepard asks only one thing of us-that with full faith and trust, we follow Him. We are to set aside the ways of the world, and set aside ourselves to seek Him. We are to place our lives fully into His hands and let His peace and promise of eternal life fill our being. That is the simple message of the Gospel.

"I am the good Shepard; and I know my sheep, and my sheep know me; and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep." What greater expression of love have we ever seen in all of human history? Do we need worry, or fret or fear danger? Never, for Christ is our Shepard, He knows us and we know Him. May that bring each of us peace, the peace of God which passes all understanding, and may it keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. AMEN