

Some words for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

*'Look upon your flock, kind Shepherd, and be pleased to settle in eternal pastures the sheep you have redeemed by the Precious Blood of your Son.'*¹



Readings:

Acts 2:14. 36-41

1 Peter 2:20-25

Psalm 22:1-6 R.v.1

John 10:1-10

Dear Parishioners of St Joseph's & St Charles,

Today's passage from St John's gospel immediately follows on from the healing of the man born blind – we heard it recently on the Fourth Sunday of Lent. You may recall that was the Sunday when our churches were open for private, personal prayer but not Mass or any other public celebration. It all seems a long time ago at present. Anyway, one might think that the extraordinary moment when a man is given sight for the first time in his life would be one of unbridled joy. On the contrary, it is a moment of bitter acrimony; one in which the religious leaders of Israel, on this occasion the Pharisees, are revealed as being spiteful and hard-hearted. In their haste to condemn Jesus it is not just the man born blind that is a victim of their contempt but his parents and the common people also. Bearing this in mind we can more readily understand why the Lord sought to distinguish his own work and leadership from that of so many of the Pharisees or other religious leaders of the day.

This is why, in today's parable, Jesus offers such a stark contrast between two opposing parties; the shepherd and the thief or brigand. Typically, now as then, a sheep pen has a gate or door by which the sheep enter or leave the security of their confine. Many villages possessed a strong and sturdy communal sheepfold and a gatekeeper was assigned to watch over the entrance. The thief or brigand, says Jesus, will seek to enter the sheepfold by means of cunning, deception or force. It was quite common for there to be more than one flock kept in the same fold and the book of Genesis also records mixed flocks being watered together at a well.² Conditioned by breeding and by birth the sheep respond to the voice of their shepherd. Recognised by the gatekeeper, the shepherd is admitted to the fold. Here the shepherd may call out to his sheep and the sheep in return will respond to his voice and he can then lead them out of the fold. This practice can still be seen today for it is the shepherd alone who can call the flock.

Recognising that *'they failed to understand what he meant,'*³ Jesus then provided his listeners with a clear, direct explanation beginning with the declaration, *'I am the gate of the sheepfold,'*⁴ which he went on to assert again almost immediately, *'I am the gate.'*⁵ Living at a time of great social and cultural pluralism, when all things are supposedly treated as being of equal weight or merit and the right of the individual to hold an opinion, no matter how ignorant or erroneous, is also sacrosanct, this declaration can appear jarring. We are so used to hearing that 'My way' is as valid as 'Your way,' yet the Lord does not state that he is 'a gate' but that he is 'the gate,' and he will go on later in the gospel to explicitly declare *'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me.'*⁶ Such an exceptional and exclusive claim, that discriminates and seemingly excludes other ways or means of entering God's Kingdom, does not perhaps sit easily with us; yet it is true.

The Lord Jesus died and rose for all people and it is the mission and ministry of the Church on earth to continue to offer this saving truth to all and for all. Through His Church, the Lord and the Spirit are at work across the face of the earth and we must ceaselessly endeavour to uphold his truth and witness by our faith, our hope and, above all, our works of charity, to all people of good faith and conscience. The Second Vatican Council asserted that *'nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God.'*⁷ In other words, the gate is not the site of elimination or exclusion, nor is admittance an invitation thereby to regard ourselves as true sheep, sole heirs to God's kingdom. We would do well to remind ourselves from time to time that, as God gives life and breath to all people, so *'whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel.'*⁸

Equally, when striving to live the gospel these days, we should heed the warning of the Council Fathers that people *'deceived by the Evil One, have become vain in their reasonings and have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, serving the creature rather than the Creator.'*⁹ The sheepfold is the place of safe-keeping; the Lord has other sheep that he wishes to belong to this fold, for *'there will be only one flock, and one shepherd,'*¹⁰ and it is designed for protection against thieves and brigands.

*'The thief [who] comes only to steal and kill and destroy,'*¹¹ is focused entirely on satisfying his own needs and gives little thought or care to the well-being of others. The false prophets, scribes, Sadducees and Pharisees whom Jesus confronted are examples of thieves and bandits, but there were and still are plenty of others. Just as Ezekiel condemned the exploitation of God's people¹² so too did the Early Church continue to struggle with its antichrists¹³ and savage wolves.¹⁴ Alas, in our own times, we have seen the Bride of Christ dishonoured and disfigured by the sins and crimes of priests and other community leaders that steal from the hearts of the faithful their trust and their faith; things that do not belong to them. Supporting and strengthening our brothers and sisters, just as St Peter was urged to do by the Lord, after he had recovered from his own threefold failure of faith,¹⁵ remains an important task for us all. *'You had gone astray like sheep but now you have come back to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.'*¹⁶

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. *'True to his name,'*¹⁷ he it is who can call his sheep one by one, by name, and lead them *'along the right path,'*¹⁸ out of the fold to enjoy, *'Fresh and green ... pastures where he gives me repose.'*¹⁹ Reassured by his voice, comforted by his crook and by his staff, we are guided *'along the right path,'*²⁰ and even should we fall into *'the valley of darkness,'*²¹ no evil need we fear. The good shepherd *'lays down his life for the sheep,'*²² so that, *'they may have life and have it to the full.'*²³ This fullness of life is not just eternal life that is to come. Enjoying the fullness of God's grace and Spirit here and now, we are enabled to rejoice in the gifts that have been given to us and find in our lives a purpose and worth that looks beyond the horizon of the self and even beyond death itself.

Today is the day when we are asked to pray for vocations to the Priesthood, to the Permanent Diaconate and to Religious Life. Our nation, at a time of great need, has just endured a period where the public presence and voice of the leader of our government, the Prime Minister, was lost to us. The absence of the holder of this office, even when recovering after a life-threatening illness was keenly felt. We recognise that all of us, be it society as a whole, or a particular community, or a family or an individual, have a deep need at times to be served by a leader. There are

points when we desire guidance and have want of a shepherd to help us along the right path, whether it is in the home or the workplace, at school or at play, in politics or public life, in want or prosperity, in sickness or in health. Like any society the Church requires governance and public servants who are tasked with promoting and celebrating the Sanctification of Christ's People,²⁴ observing the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience and of furthering the Common Good. We have need of good shepherds. Please pray for vocations, for people who will respond generously to our need, and pray too for our bishop, Ralph, and for all the Clergy and Religious who serve you. Finally, I subscribe to the view, attributed to Winston Churchill, that so often, '*Success is stumbling from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm,*' and there have been many times I have found the following meditation helpful.

THE PRIEST

*The Priest is not an angel sent from heaven;
he is a man chosen from among men, and a member of the Church, a Christian.
Remaining human and Christian, he begins to speak to you the Word of God.
This Word is not his own.*

*No, he comes to you because God has told him to proclaim God's Word.
Perhaps he has not entirely understood it himself. Perhaps he adulterates it. But he believes;
and despite his fears, he knows that he must communicate God's Word to you.*

*For must not some of us say something about God, about eternal life...
must not some of us speak of sin and the love and mercy of God?
So, dear friends, pray for him. Carry him, so that he might be able to sustain
others by bringing them the mystery of God's love, revealed in Jesus Christ.*

Karl Rahner S.J.

Our Lady of Walsingham, *pray for us.*

St Joseph, *pray for us.*

St Charles Borromeo, *pray for us.*

With my prayers,

Rev. Mark McManus

Parish Priest

3 May 2020

The photograph is of *Jesus as the Good Shepherd*, mosaic, 5th century, Galla Placidia Mausoleum, Ravenna, Italy.

1. *Prayer after Communion*, Proper of the Fourth Sunday Easter, *Roman Missal*
2. *Genesis* 29:1-3
3. *John* 10:6
4. *John* 10:7
5. *John* 10:9
6. *John* 14:6
7. *Lumen Gentium*, 16, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 1964.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *John* 10:16
11. *John* 10:10
12. *Ezekiel* 34:2-8
13. 1 *John* 2:18-22
14. *Acts* 20:29-35
15. *Luke* 22:31-32
16. 1 *Peter* 2:25
17. *Psalms* 22:3
18. *Psalms* 22:2
19. *Psalms* 22:3
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Psalms* 22:4
22. *John* 10:11
23. *John* 10:10
24. *Anointing with Chrism*, Ordination to the Priesthood, *Roman Pontifical*