

Safe In Thy Hands

Texts: Acts 4:5-12
1 John 3:19-24 (Series B, 4th Sunday of Easter) Ps. 23
John 10:11-18

Prayer:

" I know my own, and my own know me"

Jesus' life and teachings are full of surprises. He came to a generation of people who were expecting a *"conquering-hero"* type of Messiah and He told them that the Messiah would suffer and die as a common criminal. What a surprise!

He came to a generation that, like ours today, was steeped in the philosophy of revenge-an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life. He told them to turn the other cheek; to go the second mile; to love enemies, pray for them, forgive them. What a surprise! Jesus says that if we deliberately set out to save our life, we will lose it. What a surprise!

Jesus' teachings are full of surprises like this, but probably none greater than the one St. John refers to in today's Gospel Lesson. In it, Jesus depicts His relationship with us in terms of Shepherd and sheep pen.

This is not surprising. Jesus frequently used this imagery because sheep were the principal occupation of his people. If we are to learn from today's text, as the people of Jesus' time understood well, the relationship between a *good shepherd* and *his flock*. For us. To us it comes as a big surprise, of not being able to enter into the Good Shepherd's sheepfold except by just one gate.

Here they are, in symbolism, their eternal destiny being determined. And what is the question? It's not a question of how often they had gone to Church. It's not a question of what theological books they had read.

It's not a question of what academic degrees they had earned. It's not a question of how much money they had possessed. It's not a question of what part of the city or what part of the country or what part of the world they had lived in. It's not a question of skin colour or physical attributes.

These questions are not raised. There is only one question. Just one question!!! Did you feed the hungry? Did you take care of the sick? Did you visit those who are in prison and in special need? In our second lesson the apostle John spelt it out: *We know Love by this, that Jesus Christ laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.*

How does God's love abide in anyone who has the worldly goods and sees a sister or brother in need and yet refuses to help? Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. How much are we willing to give.?

That's the only question? What a surprise! The more so because worship and belonging to the Church and to study groups and making an honest living are very important and we know they are. But, in the end, it comes down to this: God places the highest value on the simple ministry of fulfilling other people's needs.

We want a sense of perspective here. Don't we? Jesus is not saying that this is the whole Christian life. He is saying that this is where it comes out. This is the fruit of all of the *effort*, the fruit of all of the *worship*, the fruit of all of the *prayer*, the fruit of all of the *Bible Study* and the *theological probing*.

This is where it comes out. This kind of love, as Paul said, is the one thing that lasts beyond all others. And if we don't have it, then we don't really have anything. We need to understand it in this perspective because Jesus does not bring this teaching to us as a *threat*. It comes to us as a *promise*. Having a "*quality*" of life with God.

On the feed lots on the prairies, ranchers bring their cattle to a common grazing ground, known as '*Feed Lot*.' On those feed lots you will find hundreds of cattle mingling around feeding from early summer to after harvest or just before winter sets in. When the time comes for the rancher to take his / her cattle home they sought through by the brand marks on their skin.

During Jesus' time, shepherds mingled their flocks into one large flock for easier movement from grazing area to another. Each shepherd called to his sheep from time to time when they were lamps. They leaned to know his voice and they would follow him when he called them out of the sheepcote.

**(Herr Garlin and the story of the ram called O' Manley in Kitzingen,
Germany 1974).**

The fact is, there are many voices out there in our world today, each telling us what to do: We have the voice of God, Satan, our own voice, and voices of other religions promising us '**God within**' etc.

Our Good Shepherd's job is never done. The demands of a shepherd are constant and endless. Sheep are peculiarly needy and helpless creatures, quite fidgety, and even self-destructive at times. They can stand still for hours or bolt into stampede because an apple drops unexpectedly from a tree.

The shepherd must keep *continuous* vigil against disease, insect infestations, predators, pecking-order fights, escape artists, water, and food supplies. Sheep will not lie down unless they are completely contented and secure.

The sheep know their shepherd's voice and it comforts them. Do we know the voice of our Shepherd? Do we stand by as those in our own or other flocks are in need and refuse ~ or neglect ~ to give help?

Jesus, as Peter told those in religious and political authority after the Crucifixion, was the Cornerstone of our Salvation rejected and executed by them. But Jesus, the Good Shepherd stood firmly, and peacefully, in the midst of their persecution, and laid down his life for us, his sheep

The sheep recognize the voice of a stranger and would not follow. With all these confusing voices around us today it imperative that we know the right voice, and the only way to find out that right voice is through what says in the Scriptures, I believe. Those who had been baptized devoted themselves to the apostles' *teaching* and *fellowship*, to the *breaking of bread* and *prayers*. [Acts 2:42]

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake. [Psalm 23:1-2] Whatever the circumstances of our daily life, we always have small moments for which we can be thankful. All we have to do is learn to remember. Lord of Heaven, Lord of Life, Lord of All, thank You for this moment.

We who want to know ourselves as true and faithful Christians must stir ourselves from our sheep pen and listen for the Voice that *calls*, and then *follow*, in earnest and in confidence. All we "*have*" on this earthly plain is temporary.

Let us not go *astray like sheep*, but rely only on the Lamb of God, Jesus the Christ, Risen and Eternal, in Him we are safe. Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) *She is best known for her words that with God, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.*

If we were to read the Gospel of John 10 (which I encourage you to read), taken line by line we can *see, feel*, and almost *hear* Jesus, our Shepherd, *with us, reviving, caring, comforting, and anointing*. Watching over us, *preparing our table, restoring us*; nothing we need is withheld.

Some days I feel pretty sheepish and need that still small voice of God as reminder to get back into the flock, to follow and, in confidence, abide in the one who abides in us.

Just as God knows each and everyone of us from the time of conception to birth, he called us through our parents, pastors, Sunday school teachers and godly people. There is no question that Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

The only question that remains at this point in the service is this: *Do you know the Shepherd? Do you hear his voice?* How you answer that question determines the quality of life you have with God and where you can expect to spend eternity.

Jesus is telling us that the most important thing for us to do in attaining this quality of life is to take seriously this ministry to those in need. The outstanding characteristics of this Good Shepherd is that: *"All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. He cares for us. He knows us. He died for us. He rose from the dead for us.*

We are safe in His hands. *For each new morning with its light, For rest and shelter of the night, For health and food, for love and friends, For everything Thy goodness sends, we give you thanks. Amen.*