

3rd Sunday of Easter (B)

26th April 2015

'I lay down my life for My sheep'

Acts 4: *"Jesus Christ the Nazarene, ... you crucified, ... God raised from the dead"*

Ps 117: *The stone which the builders rejected has become the corner-stone.*

1Jn 3: *when it is revealed we shall be like Him, ... we shall see Him as He really is.*

Jn 10: 11–18: *"I am the Good Shepherd; I know My own and My own know me."*

The image that St John gives us, this Sunday, of Our Lord as "the Good Shepherd" is a powerful one, and a rich one. We all, I think, respond warmly to this Gospel image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. It's an image that one finds used way back the history of the Church as a Christian symbol. In the catacombs in Rome, for example, when it was still rather dangerous for Christians to use clear imagery of Jesus Christ, it was very likely that the Good Shepherd would be the image of choice, to mark devotion to the Lord. Even today, two thousand years on, Jesus's image speaks strongly to our heart.

On this 4th Sunday of Easter, we always hear one or other passage of Jn 10, Our Lord presenting Himself to us as the One True Shepherd of the Flock, the tender, attentive, supreme Pastor of the Church — leading us, guiding us, feeding us, protecting us ... "laying down His life for us"!

As I reflected on this passage, I pondered on the profound significance of this phrase ... "And I lay down My life for My sheep." The more we think about this, the more we realise how deeply and passionately Jesus loves His people: how they are His, and how He wants desperately to hold on to them. "I know My own, and My own know Me," He says, but much more than that, He wants to fight for His people, cling on to them for dear life ... in fact, to be willing to "lay down My life for them." To put this in context ... how crazy it would be for an actual shepherd to be willing to sacrifice his life for a sheep ... Yet that is exactly the difference which Jesus chooses to express here: God willing to lay down His life for mankind. God, stooping far lower than a shepherd to his sheep; God stooping to love and care for mankind. God, passionately concerned to keep and protect from harm His flock.

We are reminded in the reading that the hired hand has no such passion for the sheep; and we need to assess ourselves ... do we have such a desire to protect and care

for the Lord's flock as we should? Pastors in particular — bishops, priests — are the first to need to assess their ministry in the light of Jesus's teaching: do we care for the flock as we should do? With all our heart? But all of us, too. Do we imitate the Lord Himself, doing our best each day to fight for the flock, to strive to keep them safe for eternity? ... to protect and correct, to forgive and nurture, so as to maintain the people in closeness to the Lord. Is that how we see our mission, for the Lord — for Him and with Him — to keep His people safe?

As we keep this 'Good Shepherd' Sunday, each year, as a day of prayer for vocations — vocations to the priesthood and religious life — what we must recognise is that vocations arise from *families* that are faithful. And this means that commitment from each of us — from every family in the parish — to be faithful to the Lord, in everything, but above all in our prayers, in our Mass, in our families. Vocations will only be heard where young people already know and understand from their family and their community, that a life of service to the Lord is a life

of great worth. A life given to the Church as a religious sister/religious brother/priest, is a great gift to mankind. It is one of the greatest things one can do with one's life. But for this to be plain to our young people — for it to be attractive — we must cultivate a 'climate of vocation,' an atmosphere where it is seen as normal, good, exciting, challenging, worthwhile, to give one's life to the Lord.

I am sure that the basis of this, then, is there in the Gospel today, as I have said: to be committed, every one of us, to building up the flock of Jesus, caring and protecting each member. If we love the Church, then we will truly want vocations: we will see the necessity of priests, coming forward *from our own families* to serve, sustain, lead and guide the Church. Let us pray for that. We can't be praying for vocations to come from somewhere else, but from within our own parish, from amongst ourselves. Let us have the heart, each of us, of a Good Shepherd: prepared to lay down our life for the sheep, to give from our own lives and families, that true service to our loving God.