



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



THE GOOD SHEPHERD AND VOCATIONS
FOURTH SUNDAY OF PASCHALTIDE, Year A
FATHER AMBROSE BENNETT

In today's gospel, Christ our Savior tells us that he is the Good Shepherd.

Now the image of the shepherd was already well-known in the Old Testament. In the Psalms, it is God himself who is the Shepherd of Israel:

The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters;
He restores my soul.
He leads me in the paths of righteousness
For his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil;
For thou art with me;
Thy rod and thy staff,
They comfort me (Ps 23.1-4).

Yes, that is the image of God, the true Shepherd of Israel. But the prophets spoke also of other shepherds who governed Israel, the rulers and priests who neglected the Lord's flock or led it astray. In the prophet Jeremiah, we read these scathing words:

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" says the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: "You have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. (Jer 23.1-4).

Christ evidently agrees with Jeremiah about the priests and rulers of Israel, whom Christ refers to as mere hirelings: "He who is a hireling and not a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hireling and cares nothing for the sheep" (Jn 10.7.12-13). And there are some who are worse than mere hirelings, whom Jesus refers to as thieves and robbers:

Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers; but the sheep did not heed them. I am the door; if anyone enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. The robber



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comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly (Jn 10.7-10).

Who are these robbers of whom Jesus speaks? These robbers who devour the Lord's flock are the false messiahs and false prophets—anti-Christ, all of them—who have dared to offer salvation other than through Jesus Christ, who alone is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. For as St. Peter proclaimed to his fellow Israelites, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4.12).

Through the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord has promised, “I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding” (Jer 3.15). In the person of Christ, this promise is fulfilled: Christ himself is the good shepherd who sacrifices himself for his sheep. St. John himself tells us that a very bad shepherd of Israel, the High Priest Caiaphas, spoke truly when he said that “Jesus should die for the nation, and not only for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (Jn 11.52). For that was indeed Christ's mission: by the shedding of his precious blood on the Cross to reconcile mankind to God and so to re-unite the human family in his Mystical Body, the Catholic Church. (cf Eph 2.19-22).

And yet, even though Jesus Christ is the one Shepherd, the one Priest, the Lord of the harvest, yet our Savior calls to himself an inner circle of twelve apostles, to whom he gives authority to cast out demons and to heal. They are to share in Jesus' own mission to the lost sheep of the House of Israel. The Good Shepherd calls to himself others to shepherd his flock, to be his ministers and representatives. In the New Covenant, as in the Old, the priestly ministry is entrusted to fallible and flawed men, of whom the Apostle Peter is the pre-eminent example. For the Christian priesthood is a divine treasure placed in earthen vessels (cf 2 Cor 4.7).

Yet that is how God has chosen to work among us. We, for our part, must accept this in faith: Christ the Good Shepherd, after his resurrection, asks Peter three times if Peter loves him. Each time, Peter answers with a resounding Yes; and each time, Jesus bids him to feed and to tend the sheep of his flock (cf Jn 21.15-17). Clearly the Good Shepherd entrusts Peter with the care of his flock. Our Holy Father Benedict XVI writes that it is precisely because Peter loves Christ and enters through the “door”—that is, Christ himself—that the sheep listen to Peter's voice. The sheep are not following Peter but Jesus himself, whom Christ has sent (Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 277).

As Catholics, we are called to communion through the ministry of Peter's successors, the popes, so that we may be one flock under one Shepherd (cf Jn 10.16). Many of you have undoubtedly been told that you should pray for the Pope's intentions; yet many of you probably wonder what exactly the Pope's intentions *are*. Well, for more than a century, the popes have chosen two monthly prayer intentions and made them public through the Apostleship of Prayer. So if you would like to know what the Pope's prayer intentions



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are, you can find the Apostleship of Prayer on the internet, and there you will find the intentions listed for each month of the year (see apostleshipofprayer.org).

For this month of May and especially for this Sunday, Pope Benedict XVI has put forward this intention: that the laity may embrace their responsibility for promoting vocations to the priesthood and religious life. As the Successor of St. Peter, the Pope knows that vocations to the priesthood and religious life can only come from within the Body of Christ in answer to the Lord's call and to the persevering prayer of his people: the shepherds are themselves drawn from the Lord's flock and follow Christ the Good Shepherd. I urge you, then, to pray for vocations and, if you are parents, explicitly to assure your children of your support if they feel they may be called to a priestly or religious vocation.

The Lord is still asking us, in the person of Peter, "Do you love me?" If we say yes, then the Lord bids us follow him, even if the way of discipleship seems strange and daunting by worldly standards. I regret to say that in many Catholic families, there is an attitude that priestly and religious vocations are wonderful, provided they involve someone else's children. Catholic parents who think this way are unfaithful to their baptismal vocation: for the faithful laity who truly love Christ and his Church, it should always be cause for rejoicing when a son or daughter answers the Lord's call.

I will close with the words of the Letter to the Hebrews,

May the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen (Heb 13.20-21).