

4th Sunday Easter

Year C

The Lamb Will Be Our Shepherd.

We offer in sacrifice the Lamb that takes away the sins of the world.

He who was slain is now our Shepherd.

He will lead to springs of living water all who do not reject him.

(Reading: Acts 13: 14, 43-52. We must turn to the pagans.

Apocalypse 7: 9-14-17. The Lamb will be their shepherd and will lead them to springs of living water.

John 10: 27-30. I give eternal life to the sheep that belong to me.)

Whether or not we like to admit it, there are some characteristics we humans share with sheep. For example, we want our freedom to roam about, whilst at the same time, we want to feel secure. On the one hand, we don't like to feel restricted, or being told what to do. We resent discipline, and rules, and regulations. We like to go our own way, preferring to do our own thing. On the other hand, we long to feel safe and cared for. We need to feel that we belong; to belong to something, or someone. Luckily for us Jesus knows us so well that he understands this conflict within us. That is why in today's gospel he speaks of himself as our Shepherd.

Just like sheep, we prefer to roam around freely, following our own inclinations. But freedom can be a very dangerous thing. If you were to allow a flock of sheep the freedom to wander onto, say, the A12, or along the A14, how many of them do you suppose would survive? Some would surely end up splattered across the road, and others on dinner plates, perhaps roasted, or curried.

No! Sheep need the protecting care of a guiding shepherd, one to whom they belong, because he will lead them to a safe pasture. For us, he is Jesus the Lord, the 'Good Shepherd', to whom we belong, and who leads us to safe pasture.

Another characteristic we share with sheep is our tendency to follow the crowd. Young people almost unconsciously adopt the latest craze or fad, be it, the newest fashion in clothing, or the most Up-To-Date smart phone, the latest boy band, or girl group, the most stylish holiday resort, or the trendy night-club, where one simply must be seen by all and sundry.

And older people aren't really any different. They like to be 'up to date' with all the newest home improvements. When the neighbours build a new conservatory, or an extension to their home, or park a new car outside, they, of course, have to follow suit. – We simply must keep up with the Jones'!

Now, in themselves, there is nothing really wrong in any of these things, nor in following fashions (though I wonder at some of the things I see teenagers wearing). But because we have this innate tendency to go with the latest trend, we can easily be led astray.

New ideas can seem very plausible, even attractive.

Another example: When everyone around you accepts Sunday shopping as a matter of convenient fact, its very difficult, if not impossible, for Christians not to follow suit. And, even if you didn't succumb to Sunday shopping, chances are, that you'd end up being coerced, or even being forced into working on Sundays anyway, at least, in most jobs of today.

Or again, when politicians or pressure groups seek to promote such practices as 'Voluntary Euthanasia', as exists in a number of the European countries, or research projects like 'genetic engineering', what was once unthinkable, somehow, gradually, becomes acceptable, even normal!

How well Jesus knows our weakness, and our need for a true shepherd to lead us.

The image of the shepherd leading his sheep would have been very familiar in Jesus' time. In the Holy Land, shepherds would walk ahead of the flock, leading the way, rather than driving them from behind. And this is how Jesus guides us.

"The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice," he says, "I know them and they follow me."

He doesn't force us to belong to his flock. He never takes away our freedom. He simply calls us. He invites us, and he gives us the opportunity to choose his path. That is the essence of our Christian faith. It is about belonging to Christ. He is our shepherd, and we are his sheep. He speaks, and we recognise his voice. He leads, and we follow. He is our provider and our protector, our guardian and our guide. Our lives literally belong to him. And as I've already said, belonging to something or someone, is a most basic human need.

If you look around the office of any businessman (or woman) you'd see all he needs for his work, a desk and chair, a phone, books that relate to his line of work and, commonly, a computer. All of these things belong to him. But look closer and you will see the things to which he belongs: on the desk, or the wall, pictures of his wife and children, and even grandchildren. What matters most in his life is not the things that belong to him, but the people to whom he belongs.

We belong to a family because we are born into it. We belong to a club or society because we choose to join it. But we belong to God in a far more profound sense because, he created us. We belong to Jesus, our shepherd, because he redeemed us. He bought us with his own blood. And as our 'Good Shepherd', Jesus watches over us at every stage of our lives.

At our baptism we were marked as members of his flock. Not as sheep for sale in the market, or for slaughter, but marked for life. He guides us, and he teaches us, showing us a safe path. And when we wander away from him, and find ourselves in trouble, he calls us back to him, and heals us through the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Nothing in our lives is more important than belonging. We all belong to something, we all belong to someone. The good news is that we belong to the highest and the best. This is what Jesus had in mind when he said;

"The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice:
I know them and they follow me.
I give them eternal life and they will never be lost."