

Reflection for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

In the course of his ministry Jesus used parables to give people insight into the ways of God. These parables were word pictures describing scenes from life which would give insight into his teaching. Sometimes, like today, the apostles needed further help to grasp the full meaning of the story: as in the case of the parable of the sower, and the parable of the wheat and the weeds which Jesus later explained to his disciples. The picture he paints in today's gospel is taken from the world of sheep rearing. Shepherds would lead their flock in search of pasture over common land and, in order to keep them safe during the hours of darkness, they would take them to a common sheepfold, often a field with a high wall, where they would be enclosed with other sheep for the night. There was but one entrance to the sheepfold and the shepherds would collectively hire someone to act as gatekeeper and night watchman. Thieves and brigands would prey on the sheep but because they couldn't pass the gatekeeper, they would have to climb the walls out of sight to get to the sheep.

The purpose of today's parable is to contrast the concern of Jesus for his flock with the predatory behaviour of thieves and brigands. They, unlike the shepherd of the flock, "*do not enter the sheepfold by the door but climb in by another way.*" They come only "*to steal, to kill and destroy.*" The shepherd, on the other hand, has come so that the sheep "*may have life and have it abundantly.*"

Jesus also describes himself as the "*door of the sheep.*" Like the apostles in today's gospel we find it a little difficult to understand what Jesus means by this. The door was the safe way in and out of the sheepfold. Being taken out over the wall by a thief or a brigand was a threat to the safety of the sheep. Jesus is saying that he is the one who truly cares for the sheep. He knows his sheep and "*calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.*" The sheep who enter the sheepfold through Jesus "*will be saved and find pasture.*" And as the parable continues after we finish our section today Jesus goes on to describe himself as "*the good shepherd*" who is ready "*to lay down his life for his sheep*". He contrasts himself with the "*hired man who cares nothing for the sheep and flees*" at the first sign of trouble precisely because "*he cares nothing for the sheep.*"

On the fourth Sunday of Easter, we always hear part of this special parable taken from sheep rearing which presents Jesus as the good and caring shepherd. It provides us with the opportunity to pray for vocations to the priesthood, the diaconate and religious life; for people who will dedicate their lives to the flock of Christ, following the example of the Good Shepherd himself, and who will seek to ensure that the sheep will "*have life and have it abundantly.*"