

The Holy Spirit Province NEWSLETTER



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BELONGING TO JESUS, OUR GOOD SHEPHERD: 4TH SUNDAY EASTER C

Acts 13:14, 43-52; Revelation 14:9, 14b-17; John 10:27-30

Have you ever lost a dog, a cat, a parrot, or other pet, and were at your wit's end searching for your precious pet? I ask this because of what today - Good Shepherd Sunday - is about.

Here In Australia, it's not easy to relate to sheep in personal ways. Here we have so many thousands of sheep that Australians tend to view sheep as impersonal animals, all much the same, all smelly and dumb. But for the shepherds of Jesus' day, they were more like the pets in our day that are so dear to us. Shepherds, by themselves with their sheep in the fields, would talk to their sheep (perhaps for lack of anyone else to talk to), and would call them out by name from their common holding pen. At the sound of their pet names, 'Frisky,' 'Floppy,' etc., each sheep would follow the shepherd into the fields for grazing.

The bond, then, between sheep and shepherds, is one of many different pictures we can explore, to understand better a basic need we humans share. This is our need for intimacy, for being connected to others and yet accepted as individuals, special and unique. We Christians share a need for bonding with both Jesus and fellow human beings in close and continuing friendly relationships.

Another significant connection with the gospel picture of sheep and shepherds is the weaknesses generally associated with sheep. Jesus himself understood this connection when he said that he was sending his disciples out like 'lambs among wolves' (Lk 10:3). In our First Reading from the Acts of the Apostles today (13:14, 43-52), we hear of Paul and Barnabas and their brave attempts to tell the good news of Jesus, and how they were rejected and thrown out of the city of Antioch. But as they walked out of town, so the Reading tells us to our surprise, they 'were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit.'

What all this suggests is that our Good Shepherd's care for you and me, and the call and responsibility we have to shepherd one another, centres around a different kind of power that Jesus has taught and emphasized. The power of Jesus was not the power of domination, the power to bully or boss people around. That kind of power is illustrated by the story of the captain of a destroyer who saw a light ahead and notified the radio signalman to order the approaching ship to change its course 20 degrees to the south. A message came back: 'You change your course 20 degrees to the north.' The captain sent another message: 'Change your course . . . I am Captain Cunningham.' The message came back: 'Change your course . . . I am Able Seaman 3rd class Jones.' Finally, angry and determined, the captain sent a third message: 'Change your course right away. I am a destroyer.' The message came back: 'Change your course right away. I am a lighthouse.'

As we focus on pastoral care today, Good Shepherd Sunday, we are deeply aware of how few people nowadays are saying that they feel drawn to becoming a priest or religious. I wonder if we, as the community of Jesus, were to put more emphasis on relational power rather than dominant power, whether there would be more persons wanting to take up the kind of good shepherding relationship that goes with being a good priest, brother, or sister?

Jesus, our Good Shepherd, says: 'The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me' (Jn 10:27-30). But with so many parish mergers now resulting in mega parishes, there is no way anymore that a priest can truly get to know every single parishioner. The challenge has come, then, for all parishioners to be good shepherds – accepting and caring for one another. This involves the effort, for a start, to discover and remember the names of more and more people each week, greeting them by name, and sharing with interest and enthusiasm, our concerns, needs, feelings, hopes and hurts.

This is to imitate the Good Shepherd who knows each of us by name and calls out each of us by name to the green pastures of life in community. Then, the more we strive to build a family relationship in our parish, the more we will get to know the ones who would stand out as good shepherds for all. We might then quietly and gently approach them to take on that special leadership role in the Church that being a good religious or priest involves.

The benefit of being in a shared loving relationship with Jesus our Good Shepherd is illustrated powerfully in our Second Reading today from the Book of Revelation: 'They will never hunger or thirst again; neither the sun nor scorching wind will ever plague them because the Lamb who is at the throne will be their shepherd and will lead them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away all tears from their eyes' (Revelation 7:16-17)

As we approach the table of our Good Shepherd today for Holy Communion, let us ask him to lead us to springs of living water by giving us an experience of a deeper and closer relationship with him personally, and with all our brothers and sisters gathered with us around the same table, the table of Jesus.

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