

FOLLOWING JESUS, OUR GOOD SHEPHERD: 4TH SUNDAY

EASTER C

'The sheep that belong to me,' says Jesus, 'listen to my voice' (Jn 10:27)

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

In Australia it's not easy to relate to sheep. There are so many that Australians tend to view them just as smelly and dumb animals. But for the shepherds of Jesus' day they were more like the pets in our day so dear to us. Alone with them in the fields shepherds would talk to them (perhaps for lack of anyone else to talk to), and from their common holding pen would call out each one by name. They would then respond to the sound of their own pet name and follow their shepherd into the fields for grazing.

The bond in those days between sheep and shepherd speaks to a most basic need we humans have, the need for intimacy, for being connected to others and accepted, even as someone special and unique. We also need intimacy with God - in a close and continuing loving relationship.

Another significant connection with the gospel picture of sheep and shepherd is the *'weakness'* generally associated with them. 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 Book of Acts today we hear of Paul and Barnabas and their brave attempts to tell the good news of Jesus, and how they were rejected and expelled from the city of Antioch in Pisidia. But as they walked out of town, so the Reading tells us, perhaps to our surprise, they *'were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit'* (13:52).

What all this says to me is that the story of the Good Shepherd and the call and responsibility we all have to shepherd one another centres around the different kind of power that Jesus taught and practised. 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 of one another today, Good Shepherd Sunday, we are deeply aware of how few people nowadays are saying that they feel drawn to the priesthood or religious life. I wonder if we as Church were to put more emphasis on relational power rather than dominant power, whether there would be more persons wanting to take up that kind of shepherding relationship.

With ever larger parishes there is no way a priest can truly get to know every parishioner. The challenge has come, then, for all parishioners to be shepherds to one another. This involves the effort, first of all, to learn each week the names of more and more people in the parish community, and to work at remembering their names and greeting them by name.

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

The benefit of sharing a loving relationship with Christ our Good Shepherd is powerfully illustrated 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'* (7:16-17).

As we approach the table of our Good Shepherd today for Holy Communion, let's 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 - his table!

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