

## **EASTER IV SUNDAY (AP. 29): ACTS 4: 8-12; I JN 3: 1-2; JOHN 10:11-18**

**Anecdote #1: Pope John Paul II, the good shepherd.** The most beautiful and meaningful comment on the life and the legacy of Pope John Paul II was made by the famous televangelist Billy Graham. In a TV Interview he said: "He lived like his Master the Good Shepherd and he died like his Master the Good Shepherd." In today's gospel, Jesus claims that he is the Good Shepherd and explains what he does for his sheep.

# 2: A good shepherd and the Ku Klux Klan: On June 22, 1996 at Ann Arbor, Michigan, the Ku Klux Klan held a rally at the City Hall. They had a permit for the event, it was advertised in advance, and more than 300 demonstrators appeared to protest the rally. One Klansman, who was wearing clothes displaying the Confederate flag, was attacked by a swarm of demonstrators and pushed to the ground. Appalled, an 18-year-old African-American girl named Keisha Thomas threw herself over the fallen man, shielding him with her own body from the kicks and punches. Keisha, when asked why she, a black teenager, would risk injury to protect a man who was a white supremacist, said, "He's still somebody's child. I don't want people to remember my name but I'd like them to remember I did the right thing."

# 3: "I only know them by name." Rev. Tony Campolo loves to tell the story of a particular census taker who went to the home of a rather poor family in the mountains of West Virginia to gather information. He asked the mother how many dependents she had. She began, "Well, there is Rosie, and Billy, and Lewella, Susie, Harry, and Jeffrey. There's Johnny, and Harvey, and our dog, Willie." It was then that the census taker interrupted her and said: "No, ma'am, that's not necessary. I only need the humans." "Ah," she said. "Well, there is Rosie, and Billy, and Lewella, Susie, Harry, and Jeffrey, Johnny, and Harvey, and...." But there once again, the census taker interrupted her. Slightly exasperated, he said, "No, ma'am, you don't seem to understand. I don't need their names, I just need the numbers." To which the old woman replied, "But I don't know them by numbers. I only know them by name." In today's Gospel Jesus the good shepherd says that he knows his sheep by name.

# 4: A good shepherd-sergeant's story: There was once a sergeant in the Marines who was the senior enlisted man in his platoon. One day his outfit was ambushed and pinned down by enemy fire. The lieutenant in command was badly wounded as were many of the men. The sergeant took over and extricated the men from the trap, though he himself was wounded twice. He carried out the wounded commanding officer by himself. Miraculously every man in the platoon survived, even the wounded lieutenant. Later the men said that if it were not for the incredible bravery of the sergeant they all would have been killed. He was recommended for the Medal of Honor, but received the DFC. He never wore the medal, however, because he said the lives of his men were more important than any medal. Later when he had children of his own, he loved them almost like a mother. His wife said that during the war he had learned how to be tender.

**Introduction:** The fourth Sunday of Easter is known as *Good Shepherd Sunday*. It is also the *World Day of Prayer for Vocations*. The scripture lessons are about shepherds. Each year on this Sunday we reflect on the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, devotedly taking care of his flock. The title of the parish priest, "pastor," means shepherd. A shepherd leads, feeds, nurtures, comforts, corrects, and protects his flock—responsibilities that belong to every church leader. The earliest Christians had seen Jesus as the fulfillment of the ancient Jewish dream of a good shepherd. They also wished to include the Gentiles as part of God's flock. In today's first reading, Peter asserts unequivocally before the Jewish assembly that there is no salvation except through Christ the Good Shepherd whom the Jewish leaders have rejected and crucified, and in whose name the apostles preach and heal. In the second reading, St. John tells us how Yahweh the Good Shepherd of the Old Testament expressed His love for us through His Son Jesus, the Good Shepherd, by making us His children. The Gospel text offers us both comfort and challenge. The comforting good news is that Jesus the Good Shepherd knows us, provides for us and loves us. The challenge is that we should be *good shepherds* to those entrusted to our care.

**First reading, Acts 4:8-12:** After describing the ascension of Jesus in the first chapter and the descent of the Holy Spirit in the second chapter, the *Acts of the Apostles* describes in its third chapter Peter's healing and preaching ministry. The healing of the cripple and the resulting evangelization by Peter resulted in his arrest by the Temple guards. They hauled Peter and his companions to the assembly of the leaders, elders and the scribes. Today's reading tells us that in the trial before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:5-22), Peter was empowered by the Holy Spirit to bear a renewed Easter witness to the Son of God, Jesus Christ the Nazarene, who had been unjustly crucified, but whom God had raised from the dead. Peter explained that he had healed the cripple in the name of Jesus, whom the Jews had despised and rejected but whom God had made into the cornerstone of his faith. What moved Peter to act on behalf of the cripple was his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ who, as the good shepherd, cares for such people. In imitation of the Lord who had always cared for the sick and the lowly, Peter was also moved by the same risen Lord to reach out, touch, and heal the cripple. Then Peter made the startling statement about salvation coming only through Christ Jesus: "*Salvation is to be found through him alone. In all the world there is no one else whom God has given who can save us.*"

**Second Reading, 1 John 3:1-2:** The *New American Bible* in its introduction to John's letters states that John wrote these letters to the Judeo-Christian community some of whose members were advocating false doctrines (2:18-26; 3:7). They refused to accept the full divinity and full humanity of Jesus, disregarded the commandment of love of neighbor, refused to accept faith in Christ as the source of sanctification and denied the redemptive value of Jesus' death. After recognizing and correcting these errors, John in today's second reading reminds his people that they should remember their privileges. First, it is their privilege to be called the children of God. John clarifies that we are not merely called the children of God; we are God's children in actuality. It is by grace

through baptism that we become God's children. The more we know and love the God we believe in, the more we will strive to act and live as God's children. In other words, we become like the God we believe in. As the culmination of all our privileges as children of God, when Christ appears, we shall see him "as He really is," and we shall be like him.

**Exegesis: The context:** It was in the wintertime, probably the time of the Jewish Hanukkah feast (the Feast of Dedication), which commemorated the triumph of the Jewish commander Judas Maccabaeus over the Syrian leader Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 165 B.C. Jesus was walking on the east side of the temple, which offered protection against the cold winds from the desert. The Jews had gathered round him. They were not sure whether or not Jesus was the promised Messiah. They tried to assess the situation, by asking Jesus whether he was the Christ or simply a wandering preacher, one of the many wandering preachers and healers. Instead of giving them a straight answer, Jesus tells them that he is the Good Shepherd and explains to them his role as such.

**Shepherds in the Old Testament:** In the Old Testament, the image of the Shepherd is often applied to God as well as to the leaders of the people. The book of Exodus several times calls Yahweh a shepherd. Likewise, the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel compare Yahweh's care and protection of His people to that of a shepherd. *"He is like a shepherd feeding his flock, gathering lambs in his arms, holding them against His breast and leading the mother ewes to their rest."* (Is. 40:11). Ezekiel represents God as a loving shepherd who searches diligently for the lost sheep. Psalm 23 is David's famous picture of God as The Good Shepherd: *"The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I lack. In green pastures you let me graze; to safe waters you lead me."* The prophets often use harsh words to scold the selfish and insincere shepherds (or leaders) of their day. Jer. 23:1: *"Doom for the shepherds who allow the flock of my pasture to be destroyed and scattered."* Ez. 34: 2: *"Trouble for the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Shepherds ought to feed their flock."*

**The Good Shepherd in the New Testament:** Introducing himself as the good shepherd of his flock, Jesus makes three claims in today's Gospel.

1) **He knows his sheep and his sheep hear his voice:** Just as the Palestinian shepherds knew each sheep of their flock by name, and the sheep knew their shepherd and his voice, even so Jesus knows each one of us, our needs, our merits and our faults. Of course the knowledge talked of here is not mere intellectual knowing but knowledge that comes from love and leads to care and concern for the other. He loves us as we are, with all our limitations, and he expects us to receive and return his love by keeping his words. He speaks to us at every Mass, through the Bible, through our pastors, through our parents, family and friends and through the events of our lives. "God whispers to us in our pleasures, he speaks to us in our consciences, and he Shouts to us in our pain!" (C.S. Lewis).

2) **He gives eternal life to his sheep** by receiving us into his sheepfold through Baptism. He strengthens our faith by giving us his Holy Spirit in Confirmation. He supplies food for our souls by the Holy Eucharist and by the divine words of the holy Bible. He makes our society holy by the sacraments of matrimony and the priesthood.

3) He protects his sheep by placing them in the loving hands of his mighty Father. Without him to guide us and protect us, *we* are easy prey for the *spiritual wolves* of this world: that includes Satan, as well as the seven deadly sins of pride, avarice, envy, gluttony, anger, lust and sloth. In the first part of chapter ten of John's Gospel, Jesus adds two more roles to those of the good shepherd. He goes in search of stray lambs and heals the sick ones. Jesus heals the wounds of our souls by the sacrament of Reconciliation and strengthens us in illness and old age by the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.

4) Jesus dies for his sheep: Just as the shepherds of ancient days protected their sheep from wild animals and thieves by risking their own lives, so Jesus died in expiation for the sins of all people. In the final part of this Gospel Jesus invites those who are touched and saved by the love of the Shepherd, to shepherd and care for others. "There are other sheep that are not of this fold and these I have to lead as well." Though he cares for his own, he does not discriminate and ultimately dies because he cares for all peoples.

**Life messages: Let us become good shepherds and good sheep.**

1) Let us become good shepherds: Every one who is entrusted with the care of others is a shepherd. Hence pastors, parents, teachers, doctors, nurses, government officials and politicians are all shepherds. Since shepherding a diocese, a parish, a civil community or a family is very demanding, dedication, commitment, sacrifice and vigilance are needed every day on the part of the shepherds. We become good shepherds by loving those entrusted to us, praying for them, spending our time and talents for their welfare, and guarding them from physical and spiritual dangers. Parents must be especially careful of their duties as shepherds by becoming role models for their children by leading exemplary lives

2) Let us be good sheep in the fold of Jesus, the Good Shepherd: Our local parish is our sheepfold, and our pastors are our shepherds. Jesus is the High Priest, the bishops are the successors of the apostles, the pastors are their helpers and the parishioners are the sheep. Hence, as the good sheep of our parish, **a)** Let us hear and follow the voice of our shepherds through their homilies, Bible classes, counseling and advice. **b)** Let us take the spiritual food given by our pastors through regular and active participation in the Holy Mass and by frequenting the sacraments, prayer services, renewal programs and missions. **c)** Let us cooperate with our pastors by giving them positive suggestions for the welfare of the parish, encouraging them in their duties, occasionally correcting them with constructive criticism and by praying for them. Let us also cooperate in the activities of various councils, ministries and parish associations.

3) Let us pray for vocations to priestly and religious life so that we may have more holy and Spirit-filled shepherds to lead, feed and protect the Catholic community. Christian thinking on vocation has been summarized in one profound saying: "*All are priests, some*

*are priests, but only one is the Priest.*" Christ Jesus is *the Priest* in the full sense because he is the *one* mediator between God and humanity who offered himself as a unique sacrifice on the cross. The universal priesthood of *all* believers, the sharing of all the baptized in the priesthood of Christ, has received special emphasis since Vatican II. Those who are called to make a lifelong commitment to serve as ordained ministers share the ministerial priesthood of Jesus. On this *World Day of Prayer for Vocations* we are asked to encourage and pray for our young men to respond to God's call to serve His Church in the ministerial priesthood.

Prepared by Fr. Antony Kadavil (akadavil@gmail.com) and published in the CBCI Website.