

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

(Three sermons)

TO LIVE BEYOND THE CALL OF DUTY

Jn. 10:11-18

In today's Gospel Jesus speaks of the "good shepherd" and the "hired man" - and the difference in their level of commitment. There is no suggestion that the hired man was a bad shepherd. As far as we know, he diligently performed all his duties, keeping the flock together and guiding them to an adequate supply of food and water. The difference between the two men was revealed at the point of crisis.

There would come a day when the flock would be threatened by a wolf. When the hired man's life was in danger his priority would be to care for himself and not the sheep. But the good shepherd would never do that. He would stay and, if necessary, die protecting his flock. Jesus then went on to identify Himself as the Good Shepherd who would lay down His life for the sheep.

In defence of the hired man no one can honestly criticise him simply because he is unwilling to die for sheep! He was hired to take care of them but not to give his life for the flock. That dedication, if it comes, must come voluntarily from the heart. Money cannot buy it and the law cannot require it. This is what Jesus is indicating when He says, "I lay down My life for My sheep of My own free will."

When Jesus went to Calvary, He was functioning at a level above and beyond the call of duty. The Cross was something which no one could have required of Him. No law could be passed compelling a man to sacrifice himself like that. In going to the Cross, Jesus was acting beyond the call of duty.

In every walk of life there is set a minimum of demands. A worker is expected to show up for work at a particular time, remain on the job for a certain number of hours, and do certain things while he or she is there. There is a certain minimal demand expected of a father or a mother. They must provide adequate food, clothing and shelter for their children. A minimum of duties is expected in other walks of life, too, be that person a student, a public official, a priest. We are all confronted with duties which we must perform or else we suffer the consequences of our neglect.

But we need to note that the greatness of life lies in the realm that is beyond the call of duty. Jesus is remembered and loved as the Good Shepherd because He willingly took on Himself what was extraordinary - on the Cross He laid down His life for us. Our own existence would be very dull if all we did was the bare minimum expected of us; when we give our full commitment, of course, life will be hard but it will become a joy and much more worthwhile.

This happens, for example, when a student discovers the joy of learning by making demands on himself that his teacher does not require. Family life takes on beauty and meaning when husband and wife, parents and children, begin to give of themselves for the benefit of the

others, even in small ways. People's work becomes a privilege, a commitment and more worthwhile when they stop thinking in terms of minimal requirements and begin to work above and beyond the call of duty.

That should be the aim of every follower of Christ. We should break free from legalism, doing just what the law requires, in how we work for the Church and in the time we give to prayer, in our home and in our relationships, in our local community and the wider world. 'If you love those who love you, what reward can you expect?' Jesus asked His followers. 'Even the tax collectors do as much!' We have to "love our enemies" He said ... that is above and beyond the call of duty.

Lord Jesus, You have to be our inspiration in the way we think and work. You laid down Your life for us, Your sheep. We too must learn to lay down our lives for others. We have to realise that we can never pay back the debt of gratitude we owe You because Your Sacrifice for went beyond the call of duty. May we follow Your example and do the best we can every day of our lives.

STAY CLOSE TO THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Jn. 10:11-18

Amongst the early Christians the most popular image of Jesus was that of the Good Shepherd. We have proof of this from the numerous sketches of the Good Shepherd found in the Catacombs. In today's Gospel Jesus talked about two different types of shepherds. The good shepherd leads his flock in the right direction. He feeds them with suitable food, and protects them from danger, at the cost even of his own life. The bad shepherd - Jesus refers to him as the hired hand - leads the sheep in the wrong direction, neglects to feed them, or wrongly feeds them, lets his sheep stray and get lost or hurt, and in time of danger when the wolf strikes he will abandon them and run for his own safety. This hired shepherd works only for money, whereas the good shepherd works out of devotion for his sheep.

It is obvious that Jesus was not talking about sheep. He was talking about people and about Himself. He was telling His disciples that He is the Good Shepherd and He would never run away from danger. He would stand His ground, even if it meant sacrificing His own life in order to save them. Why would a man do that, sacrifice Himself for His friends? Surely is not for money. No amount of money could convince a person to give his own life. He would have no use for it when he was dead and gone. The only possible answer is love.

Sooner or later, we all need the kind of help that money cannot buy, the help that only comes from a loving heart. I am sure you must have heard the story of the tourists who were visiting a little hospital in the third world. They saw a nun cleaning a deep wound on a man's leg. The wound was unpleasant to see or smell. The nun was gently and patiently dressing it. One of the tourists whispered to another, 'I wouldn't do that for a million pounds.' The whisper was louder than intended, and the nun overheard it. Without even looking up from her work, she said, "Neither would I!"

Our needs may not be as obvious as that man's, but we still have needs that money cannot supply. When our hearts are broken, we need someone to care. I can't think of anything

worse than weeping all alone with a broken heart. It is then we need support and sympathy. We cannot buy that. Caring is a free gift that cannot be bought.

When the Good Shepherd laid down His life for His sheep, He was doing something that no one could expect Him to do, and certainly no one could hire Him to do. The finest work has seldom been done for money. For example, no mother expects payment for caring for her family. She does it spontaneously because she loves them. She knows each child thoroughly, and in return they have complete trust in her love. Every loving mother is like a good shepherd whose devotion to the sheep cannot be bought.

Who were the hired hands to whom Jesus referred? Obviously, they must have been the religious leaders of the day. They had all those qualities mentioned above. They were not leading people to God, they were not feeding them with spiritual food, they were not going after those who had strayed from the right path, those who had got lost and hurt, and they most certainly would not have endangered their lives for them.

What about us, the sheep? We have a lot in common with sheep. Like them, we follow the crowd, never thinking where we are being led. We wander away, following our own inclinations, trying to find new pastures and new delights. We go astray because of our own stupidity, our greed, our desire for pleasure. We can be led astray by others who make evil look attractive.

How do we cope with these dangers and temptations? The only way is to stay close to the Good Shepherd. Jesus tells us that His sheep listen to His voice and follow Him because they know that they can trust Him to keep them safe and lead them to rich pasture.

Lord Jesus, there are many times when we stray from You our Good Shepherd, and we feel frightened and alone. But we mustn't, for we have Your assurance that You will never desert us. You will go in search of Your lost sheep and bring them home.

IS GOD CALLING YOU TO BE HIS PRIEST?

Acts. 4:8-12; 1 Jn. 3:1-2 & Jn 10:11-18

One of the endearing and popular titles of Jesus is: the Good Shepherd. He it is who oversees and cares for, and sustains the whole community of the Church, like a shepherd tending his flock of sheep. The Pope and the Bishops exercise their ministries on behalf of the Christ, over the universal and local churches, respectively. Priests also, and especially Parish Priests, have a share in Christ's ministry. Each Priest is called to model his life on Christ who is his Lord and Master, and will have to render an account to Christ for the way he has exercised his priesthood. Today's Gospel text describes at least two qualities of Christ, the Good Shepherd.

The Good Shepherd lays down His life for His sheep. This is what Our Lord did for us on the Cross, He sacrificed His life. The priesthood is not a business or a professional career; it is a vocation or a call to service. A priest should not be in it for money or for power politics, but for a life of sacrifice, poured out in the service of people, by preaching God's word, celebrating the sacraments, visiting the sick etc. Another way in which a priest lays down his life is by defending the people from the attacks of their spiritual enemies. These attacks

come in the form of erroneous values and practices, atheistic politics and even outright rebellion against the Church's teaching. Against these attacks, it is the priest's duty not to run away but to safeguard and uphold the deposit of faith which Christ entrusted to the Apostles and which is guaranteed by the Church's magisterium. A priest cannot sacrifice the truth for the sake of popularity, and this is where, very often he will meet the cross.

The Good Shepherd knows His sheep and they know Him. Our Lord Jesus knows each of us intimately as He knows the Father. He therefore expects His priests to develop an intimate knowledge of, and loving concern for, His people. A priest does this by meeting the people in the Church and by visiting them in their homes. He has to become familiar with people's particular situations and their different needs, so that he can act accordingly, consoling the bereaved, admonishing and advising, as the occasion demands, all in a spirit of love. The standard set before each priest is none other than Christ Himself, and yet the priest has just as much a fallen and sinful nature like any other Catholic. So, pray for all priests that they may be faithful to the task entrusted to them by the Lord. Pray also that more men will discover their call to the priesthood and respond generously. And that brings us to today's theme of Vocations Sunday.

On this Vocations Sunday, we consider, not just the particular call to the priesthood, but indeed all vocations. All of us, by baptism, share a common vocation to be disciples of Christ. However, God then goes on to call each of us further, to live out this baptismal vocation in a particular way, in a specific state of life recognized by the Church. Most of us are called to the high vocation of marriage, many to the single state, some to the priesthood, and others to consecrated life in a religious Order or Secular Institute. God is the one who calls, not we. Our task is not to decide what we want to do, but to discover what God wants us to do, and then to do it with courage.

Today, I invite all young people to consider what God might be calling them to do. To help in this process, I suggest four vital steps. 1. Intensive sacramental life. Go to Mass and Confession regularly and frequently. 2. Set aside time daily for prayer and for reading the Gospel. 3. Discover more about various vocations. Don't hesitate to go and see what is involved. 4. Have a spiritual director with whom you can talk and discuss these issues. It is a great privilege to be called by God to a particular vocation. So, discern it carefully and follow it courageously.

Lord Jesus, You commanded us to pray for labourers to work in Your harvest. We do this now by asking You to give us good and holy priests and religious who will walk in Your footsteps and lead Your flock on their journey to heaven.