

4TH Sunday of Easter 2010 – Church of Saint Ann, April 25, 2010 - R.V. Gartland

Here we are at another Good Shepherd Sunday. Every year on this fourth Sunday of Easter the wonderful image of a bearded man holding a sheep on his shoulders is set before us. This powerful image of Christ and his Church has captivated Christians for over two thousand years.

We find it etched in the walls of the catacombs, as one of the oldest images of Jesus. We bump into it regularly. Saint Ann school children gave me a great modern interpretation of this image a few years ago. I keep it in my bedroom so I see it every day, and just the other day while I was admiring the great fountain in the Ewing Cemetery, I noticed that one of the images carved on the marble is that of the Good Shepherd.

What new insight can this image of Jesus and the church offer us on this Sunday in 2010?

Sheep are best known for their strong flocking or herding and their following instincts. They will run from what frightens them and band together in large groups for protection. There is safety in numbers. It is harder for a predator to pick a sheep out of a group than to go after a few strays.

Sheep exhibit both strong flocking and following instincts. When one sheep moves, the rest will follow, even if it is not a good idea. The flocking and following instinct is so strong that it can cause the death of large numbers. Not too many years ago I heard that 400 sheep in

eastern Turkey plunged to their death after one sheep tried to cross a 15 meter wide deep ravine and the rest of the flock followed.

A good shepherd uses his crook (rod) to continually prod the sheep. They learn where they can tread and where they dare not go. If the recalcitrant sheep will not learn to follow the shepherd, the shepherd may actually break its leg and then the shepherd must carry it around on his shoulders for weeks while it heals. While this is happening the sheep develops a strong relationship with the shepherd and it also learns how to be safe. The leg is not broken to punish the sheep, but to save it, to cement its relationship to the shepherd.

If you are anything like me you have probably asked yourself in the past few months, what is happening to our Church? It seems as if it is being crippled on so many fronts. It seems to me that in many ways much of our leadership has begun to wander off in their own direction, following not the gentle, humble way of Jesus, who chooses to teach and educate rather than dictate and command, but the direction of self interest and self preservation. Almost fifty years ago God sent the Spirit to guide the Church through an Ecumenical Council. Vatican II, the highest authority in the Catholic Church, set out to put the Church on a path of openness to the world, with a strong emphasis on the rights and dignity of each and every member of the Church. The Council put a stress on the primacy of baptism, the need for consultation with and cooperation among all members of the church, called our bishops to act collegially and asked each and every baptized member to take responsibility for the church and our world.

We see that is our history from the Acts of the Apostles which we read from during this Easter season. Peter did not act alone without the college of apostles. The Church had wandered away from that history over time and had become autocratic, hierarchical clerical, absolutistic. Our worship had become ritualistic, removed from the people whose work it was. Vatican II through its liturgical reform, strong emphasis on the universal call to holiness, religious freedom, opening of the Scriptures to all, ecumenism, interreligious dialogue, and collegiality was a grace filled readjustment that sprang from the courage, determination and love for the church of so many of those involved in the Council.

In recent years, after almost all of those involved in the council have died, there has been a movement to “reform the reforms” of the council, to move the Church back to those” good old days.” When people prayed, paid and obeyed. This is not the Church called for by Vatican Council II.

Perhaps what we are witnessing today, as painful as it is, is a corrective measure, like the shepherd who breaks the leg of the sheep, not to do it harm, but to bring it back to the fold. To prevent it from doing harm to self and others and most importantly to preserve our church called to be the body of Christ to our world today, not 50 years ago.

One important reality to keep ever before our mind is that the shepherd will never abandon the sheep. Jesus will always remain with the Church. Like our heavenly Father, He is not breaking our legs, but often He breaks up our plans, breaks down our air-castles, takes away our pedestals and fancy garments, and breaks up our grandiose

schemes. Remember that the God of the Old Testament had to dislocate Jacob's leg before Jacob would properly yield his all to God. Maybe we have not been setting the right example for others; maybe we have not carefully obeyed his voice. Maybe we have been getting too close to the precipice. God will at any cost save this Church of ours. God will set us straight. The good shepherd that our God is, will always be with the sheep.

It is no coincidence that today is also World Day of Prayer for Vocations. A day to stop and reflect on the tremendous vocation that is ours. In the great act of creation God determined that this universe be self-directing. Humankind is the brain of the universe. Our decisions and actions direct the development of the universe. We collaborate with God through the choices that we make. What an awesome responsibility we share. A vocation is not an exclusive privilege of just a few; all of us are called by God to have a part in the growth and development of the church and the world.

God is calling you and calling me to shape and form and develop the future, and we do this first and foremost by shaping ourselves, by using as fully as we possibly can the potential for goodness that is within each and every one of us.

This is no easy task. It demands sacrifice, discipline, generosity, humility and enthusiasm.

You and I though our baptism have chosen to work out our vocation within the church – to allow the church to guide and direct and assist our participation in the growth and development of the church and our world in which we live.

The church can be our sure guide because whether we are wandering in the field, or straying and being sought after by the shepherd or broken and being carried on his shoulders we have the promise that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, will never ever abandon us.