

Fourth Sunday of Easter B- May 2, 2009 – Church of Saint Ann – R. Vincent Gartland

The image of the good shepherd is certainly one of the most powerful in all our scriptures. We all have images of the good shepherd, they abound in religious art. The one that strikes me is that young beardless man with a sheep on his shoulders. It has been duplicated in many versions.

We don't live in an area where we run into shepherds too often, and when we do they seldom look like the images we have in our minds. The people who first heard Jesus speak of the good shepherd were more familiar with shepherds for sure, but the first thought that came to their minds was not the shepherd in the near by field, but words spoken by the prophet Ezekiel 500 years before. Every good Jew was familiar with Ezekiel's use of this image.

Ezekiel lived at a time when the religious leaders had forgotten how to be shepherds or servants, they were out for themselves and cared little for the needs of the people they were called to serve. God through the prophet Ezekiel rails out against such leaders and make a great promise, that he himself would be the good shepherd.

Let's listen to these powerful words and this tremendous promise from the prophet Ezekiel, written 500 years before Jesus.

Read Ezekiel 34.

Every Jew listening to Jesus statement, "I am the Good shepherd", knew exactly what he was talking about and what he meant.

God's promise of a Good shepherd has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ; He was the good shepherd who would gather the sheep. A good shepherd is a gatherer, one who heals, who seeks out the lost, who brings people together; to bring back the strayed, reconcile, lead by example and by service; this is the work of God.

The devil is the scatterer. His work is the work of separation, division, condemnation.

If we want to know if we are doing the work of God a good criterion would be does this work gather, unite, heal, reconcile. This is the work of the good shepherd.

A few months ago, you may remember that our shepherd, Pope Benedict XVI, caused quite a stir by lifting the excommunication of several bishops including the Holocaust denying Bishop Richard Williamson. Pope Benedict said that this was a move toward unity, trying to bring back some straying members of the fold. The pope later admitted that this was a mistake. He

had not done his homework, he had not been well informed, but that his primary motivation was to bring about unity, to go after the straying.

In a letter to the world's bishops, the Pope admitted he had made a mistake, but maintained his motivation was Christian Unity. He then went on to say he was disappointed by the attacks and open hostility he received from both inside and outside the Church. Why would not his fellow Catholics give him the benefit of the doubt? Sure it was a bad move, but his primary reason was to attempt to end a harmful division in the Church.

This has become a problem for us lately, the inability to give others the benefit of the doubt, especially here in the United States, particularly after the last presidential election. We in the American church have forgotten how to give our fellow Catholics the benefit of the doubt.

We have been beating each other up a lot lately, threatening to withhold the Eucharist, excommunication, refusing to dialogue. We need to take a lesson from the Holy Father. Yes, one could interpret his lifting of Williamson's excommunication as support for his Holocaust denial. Or we could give him the benefit of the doubt and think he had a perfectly valid ecclesial reason, like ending a bothersome schism, for what he did.

We live in a world of shading and nuances. When people don't act in a way that we are politically or ecclesial disposed to act ourselves even when it is the Holy Father or especially when it is the Holy Father it is always a good idea one might even say a Christian idea, not to presume the worst and jump to a personal attack on the person's motives and character. As Pope Benedict himself said to the priests of Rome, "Catholicism has always been considered the religion of the great "Both /and" not of great forms of exclusivism, but of synthesis. Not of scattering and dividing, but of gathering and reconciling.

Fundamentalism, political or theological has no place in the Catholic Church, and when we use such standards to judge one another, we are simply being self destructive.