

The Fourth Sunday of Easter, Cycle A

Acts 2:14A, 36-41

Psalm 23:1-2A, 3B-4, 5, 6

1 Peter 2:20B-25

John 10:1-10

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As a newly ordained priest in the late 1980s, my first assignment was to live and work in Nairobi, Kenya. A great thing about preaching there was that the imagery Jesus uses in the Gospels didn't need to be explained. On the contrary, the folks in the congregation had greater insight into Our Lord's words about planting, harvesting, fishing and flocks than I had ever acquired in the seminary. You see, while Nairobi is a great city, most of the parishioners had grown up in the countryside. So, for example, I often felt like I was the only person in the room who had never had charge of a flock or a herd. Now, at least a few of the people listening to these podcasts are in East Africa, but for most of the rest of us, some background information about pastoral life as it was lived in Jesus' time might be helpful.

In those days sheep were the entire livelihood of many people. The loss of a single animal could be an economic calamity. During the day, shepherds led their individual flocks in search of water and good grazing. They kept a constant look out for predators and thieves. In the course of long days, they became as familiar with the individual animals as a modern investor might be with the stocks in his or her portfolio. They would know the sheep by name.

As night drew on, a number of shepherds would herd their flocks together for security. They would be sheltered in a walled compound

with a single gate. Anyone who tried to enter the sheepfold by climbing over the wall was up to no good. A shepherd would sleep by the gate. If he was a good shepherd, the only way anyone was going to get at those sheep during the night was over his dead body.

When morning came, the sheep had to be sorted out into their individual flocks for another day's quest for water and good grazing. But how could this be done? The sheep weren't branded like cattle in a western movie. They weren't marked with paint the way modern flocks are. Instead, each shepherd would come to the gate and call out to his flock. The sheep knew their shepherd's voice and responded to it. They came out of the pen and followed him into the hills.

Apparently at some point Our Lord watched this process play out, and it inspired his words in today's passage from John's Gospel.

Jesus said:

...whoever does not enter a sheepfold through the gate  
but climbs over elsewhere is a thief and a robber.

But whoever enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

The gatekeeper opens it for him, and the sheep hear his voice,  
as the shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

When he has driven out all his own,  
he walks ahead of them, and the sheep follow him,  
because they recognize his voice...

Language like this inspires the Church to recognize Jesus as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

In verdant pastures he gives me repose;

beside restful waters he leads me...

He guides me in right paths...

Even though I walk in the dark valley

I fear no evil; for you are at my side.

With your rod and your staff

that give me courage.

That's what it's like to be a member of Christ's flock. Our shepherd calls each of us by name, and lays down his life for love of us, showing *us* how to shepherd one another.