

4th Sunday of Easter 2020

The great Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy, wrote a short story about a king who wanted to see God. The king demanded that the priests and wise men show him God, but, of course, they were unable to do so. A shepherd, who had heard of the king's desire, offered to undertake the task. He told the king that human eyes could not see God. But then, the king wanted to know at least what God does. "In order to answer your question," said the shepherd, "we will have to exchange clothes." With some hesitation, but driven by curiosity, the king agreed; he gave his regal robes to the shepherd and dressed himself in the other's simple clothing. Then the king got his answer; the shepherd, referring to the change of clothing, said: "This is what God does.". The point of the story is that the Son of God left off his divine splendour, put on the humble clothes of our humanity, and came to us as a shepherd. I am *"the shepherd of the flock"*, says the Lord.

The 4th Sunday of Easter is often referred to as "Good Shepherd Sunday, so it is fitting that the Responsorial Psalm of today's Mass is Psalm 22 which begins, *"The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want"*. Often that Good Shepherd comes to us in the person of another; today gives us the opportunity to remember, with gratitude, those people who have been good shepherds in our lives. We think of parents; grandparents; favourite aunts or uncles; teachers; good friends; priests, as well as those whom we meet momentarily in life, but whose word or action touched our souls with grace. Jesus speaks of the shepherd as going ahead of the sheep, *"and the sheep follow because they know his voice"*. In the beauty of the lives of these trusted ones we have heard the voice of truth and love. They are, or have been, the *"shepherds and guardians"* of our souls and a real presence of Christ in our lives. We give thanks to God for them.

But such thoughts should cause an examination of conscience as to how each of us fulfils his or her own Christian vocation as parent, teacher, guide, friend, priest and neighbour. We, who are called to faith by the Good Shepherd, are in turn to be good shepherds to our children, our friends, our neighbours, our work colleagues, and indeed, to all whom we encounter in life; they are to recognise in us the trusted voice of Jesus. This is both a privilege and a responsibility. Let us pray that we do indeed guide others *"along the right path"*.

From within the Christian community there are those who are called to represent the Good Shepherd in a special way and to serve the community with the heart of the Good Shepherd. For that reason today is also a day of prayer for priestly vocations - we pray that the Lord will give us "*shepherds after his own heart*" (cf *Jer.3:15*). It may appear to some that encouraging vocations to the priesthood is perhaps to promote that which is obsolete! Yet, at the same time, it seems clear that our communities still deeply desire the service of a priest, particularly on occasions of great joy, but also in moments of sadness and trial, such as in this time of pandemic.

Ours is a fragmented world where many live in a state of permanent distraction, pulled one way or another by one demand after another, while others are "prisoners of the fleeting moment" (*PBV 7*). Nevertheless, many people yearn to be know that life has a purpose, that there is a God who loves us, a God who can be known, and that in the end all will be well. The great challenge, the real joy, for the priest is to bring the Good News of God's love to a world in sore need of spiritual values. But the priest himself must first be a living witness to that love - his must be a life of love that speaks a language of love.

St. Pope John Paul 11, using rather startling and radical language, once said that a priest must love those in his care "with the deep love of a husband for his wife"! (*PBV 23*) This love is a different love, but no less a love, and no less intense! Priesthood, therefore, is first and foremost a life of love - a life requiring the same heartfelt "yes" that Peter gave to Christ when asked "*Do you love me?*" (cf *Jn.21:15-17*)

A good pastor is not measured by his busyness, nor by the breadth of his scholarship, nor by his ability as an administrator, nor by his practised cheerfulness, although these may be important aspects of his ministry. A traditional prayer asks, "make my heart like unto thine"; burning with such a desire does the priest become an authentic sign of the Good Shepherd "*who lays down his life for his sheep*" (*Jn.10:11*). It is through such a heart that Christ speaks to his people when the Gospel is proclaimed, becomes present to them when the sacraments are celebrated, and touches them with his healing love through a caring pastoral ministry. This is the real joy and the beauty of the priesthood; in the end, only this vision of priesthood makes it an attractive and challenging way of life.