

4th Sunday of Easter (A)
(Acts 2:14.36-41 / John 10:1-10)
07.05.2017
The smell of the sheep

We have all seen these images of the Good Shepherd: a young blue eyed tall white man dressed in an immaculate white garment, showing no feelings, totally in control, looking at a clean flock, all the sheep quiet and busy grazing in an idyllic setting.

As we heard in our first reading, St Peter for his part speaks of a shepherd who suffered and was insulted, one who was tortured and died on a cross. The apostle's description is less clean and romantic than our pious pictures!

In the parable of the shepherd who has one hundred sheep and who leaves them in order to go and find the one which is lost, we see what our Good Shepherd did for us.

The amazing thing is that while Jesus did this for us two thousand years ago, he does it every day, each time one of us is lost, in a situation of distress or peril, each time we fall or wander far from him. Over and over again, he looks for us, he is ready to go the extra mile because he loves us and cares for us.

The Good Shepherd looks out for you and me when we feel lost, unloved and lonely. In his great mercy, he carries each one of us on his shoulders, our pain becomes his pain, our suffering becomes his suffering. And so today, his white garment is stained when migrants die at sea, when walls of division and separation are erected, when Christians in Egypt or Buddhists in Tibet are persecuted, when men and women are humiliated, bullied or despised because of their race, their colour or their sexual orientation.

I always found it strange to see images of the Good Shepherd which depicts a shepherd who does not carry a sheep on his shoulders. Is it possible to imagine that at one moment in human history, there was not one sheep in need of support, encouragement and care from the Good Shepherd?

The job description of the Good Shepherd does not mention time off and a fixed number of work hours. The Good Shepherd is always and for ever carrying one of us – and all of us – on his shoulders.

The Good Shepherd is not carrying us from afar, at a distance, exercising a kind of telescopic charity. In Jesus Christ, God put on our humanity in order to embrace us, to carry us on his shoulders.

In the Church, all those who exercise a pastoral ministry, all the men and women who are responsible for the life and unity of a Christian community should model their lives on the Good Shepherd in a very special way. However today it may be important to reflect on how, in the various responsibilities that we exercise in our families, in our workplaces or in our Christian communities, we should all strive to bear witness to the Good Shepherd, and embody his attentiveness in our daily lives.

One aspect which seems particularly important for Jesus is that the Good Shepherd knows his sheep, he can call them all by name. We know the importance of naming in the Bible as a sign of deep communion and connection.

If we want to reflect something of the ministry of the Good Shepherd in our families and communities, we have to ask ourselves: do we know one another in a real way? Here the example of Jesus shows us that the connection we are talking about has nothing to do with the so-called friendship experienced on twitter or facebook. We are not talking about the

common commercial practice whereby people we have never met call us by our first name, repeating it at the beginning of each sentence as if we have been great pals for many years.

Do we take the time to know one another? Are we patient and perseverant enough to build up true and genuine relationships? Do we share with one another what is at the heart of our lives? This is what Pope Francis meant when he expressed the desire that priests should have “the smell of the sheep” (Homily, 28.03.2013).

He was stressing the point that if we want to serve one another, if we want to be part of the ministry of the Good Shepherd, we must know one another and really connect with one another.

According to St Paul we are supposed to “carry one another’s burdens” (Gal 6:2). Like the Good Shepherd who carries us on his shoulders, it is part of our mission to carry one another in love. This carrying is not reserved to the clergy. In the Body of Christ, we carry one another, really, not being afraid of getting dirty or stained by the tears, the sweat or the blood of the brother or the sister who is struggling and suffering. Pope Francis warns us that “there cannot be Christians, much less pastors, who sadly stop ‘midstream’ for fear of ‘getting their hands dirty’” (Meditation, 06.11.2014).

The ministry of the Good Shepherd is a strong and demanding ministry of support and encouragement. Most of all it is a life giving ministry. As Jesus declares: “I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full”.

As a parent, a sibling, a relative, a colleague, a priest, a religious sister, a monk or a friend, do I have a real concern for the life of those around me, their physical, intellectual, spiritual, emotional and psychological well-being? Or am I so self-centred, so cosily happy in my bubble that I do not concretely care for others?

The Good Shepherd does not gather us together so that we may merely survive in small ghettos but so that we may “have life to the full”. Do we satisfy ourselves with mere survival or do we strive to create a society and Christian communities where all the aspects of human life are respected and enhanced? Unfortunately there are many subtle ways to starve people: in denying them the right or the possibility of being educated or formed for a particular job or ministry, in exercising authority in such a way that those confided to us never grow in maturity and responsibility.

Today, as we celebrate the Good Shepherd, let us pray for Pope Francis, for our bishops, for the priests and all the religious men and women who are the shepherds of the community confided to their care. But let us pray also for ourselves, for all of us that we may carry and encourage one another on the way of life, to plenitude of life, each one according to God’s calling.