

4TH SUNDAY OF EASTER (Cycle B)

May 11, 2003 -- Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.

PREAMBLE

I am Deacon Bill Nourse. I'm assigned to sacramental ministry at the Church of the Holy Spirit. I also am in full-time ministry with the Marriage Tribunal of the Diocese of Memphis.

Father Vu was kind enough to allow me to come and visit with you this morning. In a way, it's almost like coming home. Fifty years ago, I was an altar boy in this very church. I went to school across the street. I feel in comfortable surroundings here. Thank you for allowing me to be here.

INTRODUCTION

On this Mother's Day, the Good Shepherd Gospel is a good one for us to hear. Like the Good Shepherd, mothers know their children and their children know them – and like the Good Shepherd, a mother will lay down her life for her children.

The image of the Good Shepherd provides for us a good model of the image of a good mother – giving tenderness, care, compassion, trust, safety – sometimes suffering. It is all freely given – the love of the shepherd for the sheep and the love of a mother for her children. So let us especially remember our mothers this day, and keep them in our prayers.

Jesus laid down his life voluntarily and was completely free not to do so – but He could not do otherwise, because of what He was.

MOVE

In Jesus, all the messianic promises of the Old Testament have been fulfilled. In our first reading, Peter talks about the healing of the cripple. This healing symbolizes a new, healed world fulfilled in the Messiah. We know that the God, who raised Jesus from the dead, will prevail and raise the whole world from the sickness and death of sin.

That's hard for us to see sometimes. We live in a dangerous and worrisome world. But our world is not much different from the world of any other

generation – filled with tyrants, fools, mobs – and with loving and compassionate people.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, leads us to God the Father through an uncertain world. But we may be at peace with ourselves and each other, IF we are secure in the knowledge that we are guided by love, the love that God Himself has for us all.

Just before the “Good Shepherd” Gospel we heard a moment ago is another story of Jesus’ healing. We didn’t hear it today, but it was the story of the man born blind – the 9th chapter of John’s Gospel. Jesus healed the blind man – the Pharisees refused to believe that Jesus had performed a miracle – and they tried to discredit Jesus.

That story ends with the formerly blind man giving testimony to Jesus – and the Pharisees driving him out. The formerly blind man is blessed with spiritual as well as physical sight – but the spiritual leaders of Israel refuse to see. Jesus goes on to talk about spiritual blindness.

So if the world fails to recognize the true nature of Jesus and his disciples – us – if we often misunderstood and criticized – as we are – let’s remember that what we truly are not yet come to light to everyone. There are those who are still blind.

Jesus then uses various pastoral metaphors about sheep, gatekeepers, and the gate of the sheepfold – he identifies himself first as the gate of the sheepfold – then as the good shepherd. He contrasts himself with thieves, bandits who do not enter by the gate -- and strangers whom the sheep refuse to follow. Then he contrasts himself with the hired hand who is supposed to take care of the sheep but who really cares only for his own personal welfare.

It seems clear that each of these negative images (those who refuse to see, thieves, bandits, strangers, and hired hands) are thinly veiled metaphors for the Pharisees who, in their encounter with the formerly blind man, reveal themselves to be uncaring about the blind man and heedless of the truth. Their actions are selfish, and have nothing to do with love of God or man. The formerly blind man refuses to follow them -- and, in fact, courageously opposes them -- because he sees clearly that it is Jesus, not the Pharisees, who is the good shepherd -- who deserves his trust.

Jesus identifies himself as the good (Greek: *kalos*) shepherd. There are two Greek words for “good.” The one used here is one which has a deeper meaning – a thing or a person is not only good, but in the goodness there is a quality of beauty, loveliness, attractiveness, graciousness, sympathy, which makes it a lovely thing – not just “good” as in the sense of efficient or competent, like we’d say that someone is a “good” mechanic.

I’ve often thought that being a shepherd would be a pretty good life – lots of fresh air – sheep are pretty quiet and docile – the dog does all of the work – you just sit under a tree and play the flute or something. Sounds pretty relaxing. Not a lot of stress.

But then Jesus says that a good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Uh, oh . . . wait a minute.

I guess I hadn’t thought about that. Sheep wander off and have to be found and brought back. They get stuck in precarious places and have to be rescued. Sheep are kind of like us, aren’t they?

And wolves come after them sometimes. There’s always a wolf.

Remember King David? Before he was a king, he was a shepherd boy. He killed a lion and a bear in defense of his sheep. I guess being a shepherd is not so easy after all.

MOVE

But Jesus goes even beyond that. A good shepherd will risk his life to protect the sheep – but that is different from laying down one’s life. The shepherd might risk his life for the sheep, but he doesn’t expect to die. It happens sometimes, but not that often. Even people who engage in risky occupations – firemen, policemen – typically believe that it will be someone else who will die. They might risk their lives, but they plan to live – not to lay down their lives.

A fireman who dies leaves the fire to be fought with one less fireman. A policeman who dies leaves us with one less policeman to fight crime. A shepherd who dies leaves the sheep defenseless – the only good fireman or policeman are alive – the only good shepherd is a live shepherd – or so it would seem.

But Jesus says otherwise. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." A good shepherd does not go to the field intending to die, yet Jesus did exactly that. Jesus came into the world to die on the cross, and it is His death that saves us from death – or perhaps we should say that it is His resurrection – His victory over death – that gives us victory over death.

I don't know that much about sheep, but they pretty much all look alike to me – if you've seen one, you've seen 'em all. But Jesus says, "I know mine and mine know me." He knows us because He is one of us – He has lived in our skin and has experienced our joys and sorrows. We are not just anonymous sheep to him. None of us is a number. None of us is insignificant. We are the people for whom He was willing to die.

MOVE

If there is a good shepherd, there must also be a bad shepherd. Jesus contrasts the good shepherd, not with a thief, but with a hired hand -- a mercenary who cares only for his paycheck -- who has no affection for the sheep and who feels no great responsibility for them -- who sees shepherding, not as a calling, but only as a job -- who runs away from danger, allowing the wolf to snatch and scatter the sheep.

A bad shepherd will tend the sheep only until he receives a better offer. Then he'll go tend someone else's sheep. In a sense, having a bad shepherd is worse than having no shepherd at all. He gives the illusion of protection without protecting.

There is a lesson here for us. It is not enough to go through the motions as a Christian. Christ wants more than lip service -- he wants our hearts. Paul says, "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth."

Christ calls us, in ways great or small, to proclaim the Good News of the salvation available through him. Indifference is, itself, bad, because lives are at stake.

MOVE

Jesus says, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold." A sheep fold is an enclosure or a corral where the sheep live when they are not grazing for food. It provides security and fosters a sense of community. Jesus says that he will bring these other sheep also, and there will be one flock, one shepherd.

Who are these other sheep?

They are those who are separated from us for one reason or another. Today there are many barriers that separate us from one another. National, racial, educational, vocational, financial. Such barriers are inappropriate among Christians. Christ calls us to be "one flock." Jesus came, not merely as a teacher or judge, but to open our eyes to God, that God accepts everyone, even those rejected by others.

CONCLUSION

Well, so what? What's the point? What am I supposed to do about that?

There's a story about a church in Strasbourg that was destroyed in World War II. After the bombing the people noted that a statue of Christ with outstretched hands was still standing. It had been sculpted centuries before by a great artist. But both hands of Christ had been sheared off by a falling beam.

A sculptor in the town offered to replace the broken hands, but the church leaders decided to leave the statue as it was – as a reminder that Christ has no hands in this world but ours – that God's work is done through his people.

If Christ is to minister to those in need, it must be with our hands. If he is to take care of the sick, it must be with our hands. If he is to reach out to those who are lonely, or hungry, or naked, or imprisoned, it must be with our hands.

[He has no hands but ours.]

BISHOP'S APPEAL

And that brings us to the “Bishop’s Appeal.” Yes, it’s that time of year again.

The Bishop’s Appeal is not just contributing money to “the Bishop” to spend however he likes. It’s one way we reach out with the hands of Christ as a Church in West Tennessee.

As I said, I work in the Marriage Tribunal. We handle all the dispensations and annulments for the Diocese. In a sense, I deal with “love crucified” every day. It can be emotionally draining, but it is rewarding work because it can help people reconcile themselves with their church and make sense of a shattering event in their lives.

There is no charge for our services. We have no set fees. We will accept voluntary contributions, but not while a case is in progress – only after a case has been decided and completed.

Over the last thirty years, contributions have averaged less than \$4,000 a year. That’s not quite \$30 a case. That’s to fund a staff of three full-time people and a half-time priest. The rest is funded by the Bishop’s Appeal.

Now, it’s true that our office does serve only those of our own community – Catholics who are divorced and want to be remarried in the Church. But the Bishop’s Appeal funds many other things.

It funds the seminary education of our next generation of priests. Many of the priests we have today would not be here if it were not for the funds provided through the Bishop’s Appeal.

And it’s not just for us Catholics. It’s not just for us to spend on ourselves. The Bishop’s appeal funds many activities of the Church in the greater community of the 21 counties in west Tennessee.

As the Church, we constitute less than 4% of the population of west Tennessee. And as the Church, it is our responsibility, our duty, to serve the other 96%.

Yes, it’s true that other denominations have “outreach ministries” – but we offer many services to the greater community. We reach out to the unchurched and to alienated Catholics. We provide help for the homeless –

ministry to refugees – help for abused women – ministry to those in prison – housing for the poor and the elderly in Memphis, Humboldt, Jackson, Camden, Dyersburg, Moscow – campus ministry at the University of Memphis, Rhodes, and the University of Tennessee – and many other things which serve those who are not necessarily Catholics. All funded by the Bishop’s Appeal.

4% of the population of Tennessee is doing the work of the Church in west Tennessee.

And really, it’s not even that many. Many of our people don’t participate in the Bishop’s Appeal at all. So that leaves even fewer to carry the load for the whole church.

I would ask you to prayerfully consider contributing to the Bishop’s Appeal this year, even if you have never done so in the past. Even a one-time contribution is better than none at all.

Remember – you’re not just “giving money to the Bishop.” You are participating in the mission of the Church in west Tennessee.

He has no hands but ours.

READINGS

Reading I

Acts 4:8-12

Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said:
"Leaders of the people and elders:
If we are being examined today
about a good deed done to a cripple,
namely, by what means he was saved,
then all of you and all the people of Israel should know
that it was in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean
whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead;
in his name this man stands before you healed.
He is the stone rejected by you, the builders,
which has become the cornerstone.
There is no salvation through anyone else,
nor is there any other name under heaven
given to the human race by which we are to be saved."

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 118:1, 8-9, 21-23, 26, 28, 29

R. (22) The stone rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone.

or:

R. Alleluia.

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his mercy endures forever.

It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to trust in man.

It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to trust in princes.

R. The stone rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone.

or:

R. Alleluia.

I will give thanks to you, for you have answered me
and have been my savior.

The stone which the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.

By the LORD has this been done;
it is wonderful in our eyes.

R. The stone rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone.

or:

R. Alleluia.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD;
we bless you from the house of the LORD.

I will give thanks to you, for you have answered me
and have been my savior.

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his kindness endures forever.

R. The stone rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone.

or:

R. Alleluia.

Reading II

1 Jn 3:1-2

Beloved:

See what love the Father has bestowed on us
that we may be called the children of God.

Yet so we are.

The reason the world does not know us
is that it did not know him.

Beloved, we are God's children now;
what we shall be has not yet been revealed.

We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him,
for we shall see him as he is.

Gospel

Jn 10:11-18

Jesus said:

"I am the good shepherd.

A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

A hired man, who is not a shepherd
and whose sheep are not his own,

sees a wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away,
and the wolf catches and scatters them.

This is because he works for pay and has no concern for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd,

and I know mine and mine know me,

just as the Father knows me and I know the Father;

and I will lay down my life for the sheep.

I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.

These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice,
and there will be one flock, one shepherd.

This is why the Father loves me,

because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.

No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own.

I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again.

This command I have received from my Father."