

Jesus – The Universal Shepherd

April 25, 2021, Fourth Sunday of Easter (Good Shepherd Sunday)

Gospel of John 10:11-18

Fr. John

*'I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd'. (John 10:16)*

When I was growing up within the Catholic environment in which I was raised, I was given to understand this particular passage from John's gospel referred to other particular religious denominations other than the one I was born into - namely the Roman Catholic Church. And the phrase: 'There is no salvation outside the Church' was a commonly held understanding not only among the laity but also by many clergy.

We, as Catholics, were the one true flock and all others were to be converted to our camp. It was we who had the exclusive rights to salvation - to which others did not have the same access.

Now there is a certain way of understanding that line of thinking in which we see ourselves as truly and undeservingly blessed and gifted with such a rich spiritual tradition. And on this Good Shepherd Sunday, I am certainly grateful for my vocation of ordained priesthood within that tradition.

But having said that, there is a danger that such an attitude could also lead to a religious smugness and exclusivity reminiscent of that of the elders, scribes, and leaders that Peter and the other apostles were up against as recounted in today's first reading. Feeling that only they had authority in religious matters, they disputed that those outside their ranks [like the apostles] could somehow give witness to God's power.

It wasn't until The Second Vatican Council in the early 1960's that the Catholic Church in its documentation on Ecumenism and the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions, offered an official declaration on the *authenticity of God's Spirit working in all people who were seeking for truth and justice*. It was an historical and earth shaking statement considering the attitude that it had held for centuries.

The gospel announces an obvious fact that most of us do not know how to deal with. Namely that we will all be one flock, one family, one in love, one in sharing all that we possess. This is an ecumenical call that reaches across, churches, nations, races, and ethnic groups. If we are fearful of such a call, perhaps we can understand why the leaders demanded of Peter an account for the curing of a disabled man. After all, who was *he* to display the healing works of God!

Indeed, what would happen to society and its balance or imbalance of wealth if suddenly all deprived people and underdeveloped nations could run as fast as the rest of us privileged people? Perhaps we too would summon those miracle workers for an explanation.

The point is - what we try to suppress may be the exact thing we need to turn our lives around enthusiastically to God.

The gentleness that gets in the way of our hard business deals.

The generosity that will restrict the luxuries we feel we owe ourselves.

The confidence in others which leaves us open to be taken advantage of at times.

All these beautiful virtues that tend to be suppressed - like Jesus on the cross - the stone that is rejected which becomes the cornerstone.

These days we are witnessing many social, moral, and ethical upheavals in our world. Issues like voter-suppression, white supremacy and privilege, gender issues and so on. These challenge us in accepting others despite our denials of prejudices and fears.

The people on the fringes of society are the very ones Jesus would recognize - the unwashed shepherds; the unwelcomed foreigners; the traitorous tax collectors; the abused prostitutes; the lepers who were supposedly non-existent and unseen by the rest of society. They have become the cornerstones. And because of them, Jesus was neglected and then hounded to death.

But in the process, Jesus reminded them - and us: 'See what love the Father has given to all of us that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are'.

Jesus is truly the good and universal Shepherd. He claims all human being as members of his flock no matter what sheepfold we find ourselves in. And that is Good News! Indeed it is the Gospel Truth. Amen