

Good Shepherd Sunday 2017
05/07/17

The fourth Sunday of Easter is traditionally called Good Shepherd Sunday. But in our 21st century land of Inver Grove Heights, we simply can't appreciate the lifestyle of a shepherd. However those who heard Jesus speak of shepherds would have related with no problem. Shepherds taking care of their sheep at all costs? Well, that's what shepherds did. We often heard Jesus refer to Himself as a shepherd and we know he laid down His life for us. Jesus was, therefore, the ultimate shepherd.

Shepherds acting as gates? Again, no problem. As night fell, a shepherd who knew he would be away from the safety of his home would look for a place to bed the sheep. It would typically be a place that afforded one way in and one way out, like a cave. The shepherd would then literally become the gate, lying down at the entrance to protect the sheep. He wasn't about to let anything or anybody get to those entrusted to his care.

And finally, sheep answer the call of their shepherd and only their shepherd. I've heard it said that if you put several groups of sheep in the same pen and have a shepherd call his, only his will come; the rest will stay put. Sort of like when a child hears the call of a parent, right? They come right away, right? Again I have no direct experience, but that's what I'm told and what I've observed. At least some of the time.

My friend Fr. Joe Robinson tells a story of a young man who was trying to get a job with the circus, any job at all. The manager decided to give him a chance to be assistant lion tamer and took him to the lion's cage. The head lion tamer was a beautiful young lady who was just about to rehearse her act.

She stepped into the cage, removed her cape with a flourish, displaying a gorgeous costume and then she spoke a command to the lion. Obediently the lion crept towards her and then rolled over twice

before it sat on its hind legs to beg for a treat. “Well,” the manager said to the young man, “do you think you can learn to do that?” “I’m sure I could,” he replied, “but first you’ll have to get that lion out of there.”

So how important is listening to a particular voice? When my dad was alive, he lived at an independent living residence outside of Chicago. Mary, a good friend of his, lost her husband and moved into the same complex. Sadly, she was losing her eyesight and had a hard time recognizing people and things unless she was very, very close to them. Ah, but a voice? That she could recognize without any trouble. For instance, as soon as I said hi to her, she acknowledged me because she knew my voice, even though she could not see me clearly. And so it is with parents and kids, and shepherds and sheep.

Just as the lion recognized the voice of its trainer and Mary recognized my voice, Jesus tells us in today’s Gospel that the sheep recognize the voice of the shepherd. Sheep will not follow a stranger because they do not recognize the voice of a stranger. At the end of today’s Gospel, Jesus tells us that He came so that we might have life and have it more abundantly. Is Jesus saying we should accumulate lots of stuff? Is He talking about that kind of abundance? Of course not.

Jesus is telling us that true abundance comes not from what we possess, but from how deeply we love, how generously we share, how faithfully we listen to His voice, the voice of the ultimate Shepherd. He is saying that if we want to fill the emptiness in our souls, all the stuff in the world can’t take care of it. As one author puts it, Jesus is asking us to develop an “abundance mentality,” a way of thinking and acting that says: “There is enough for everyone, more than enough food, love ... everything!” When we live with this mind-set, we begin to see the miracle of what we give away multiplying to the point of having plenty left over.

Madison Avenue voices will tell us we can never have enough – Jesus tells us we already have enough. Which voice are you listening to?