**Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year A**

**May 3, 2020**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: Acts of the Apostles 2:14a, 36-41 (God has made Jesus both Lord and Christ.)*

*Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 23 (The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.)*

*Second Reading: 1 Peter 2:20b-25 (You had gone astray like sheep, but have returned.)*

*Gospel: John 10:1-10 (Jesus is the true Shepherd and the gate of the sheepfold.)*

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is commonly referred to as “Good Shepherd Sunday,” for obvious reasons. In all three years of the Lectionary cycle, the gospel for this Sunday comes from the discourse in which Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd, who gives his life for his sheep. Of course, that biblical image of the shepherd did not originate with Jesus. It goes back many centuries and is found throughout the Old Testament, including in today’s responsorial psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.” Yet, the shepherd image reaches its greatest expression and its greatest fulfillment in Jesus.

The Old Testament frequently refers to the chosen people of Israel as God’s sheep or God’s flock. God the Shepherd, by his own initiative, called a people to be his own and then made a covenant to bind them to himself forever. God promised to lead them, instruct them and protect them, and also to discipline them whenever they went astray. For their part, the people were obligated to follow all of God’s commandments – to listen to the voice of their Divine Shepherd and walk faithfully in the way that he showed them.

It seems, though, that God never intended to do all of the shepherding *by himself*. In every age, he has raised up *leaders from among the people* and appointed them as shepherds over the flock. *Moses* was the first, at the time of the Exodus from Egypt. Against his will, Moses was directed by God to take charge of his fellow Israelites and lead them on their long journey through the desert to the Promised Land. During that trek, his responsibilities included instructing the people in God’s commandments, holding them accountable to the covenant, and interceding with God to provide for their basic needs. On numerous occasions, when the people sinned grievously, Moses also implored God’s mercy on their behalf. After the Israelites entered the Promised Land, while they were still a loose confederation of tribes, God appointed a succession of “*Judges*” to shepherd them. These were a blend of military commander and civil servant, charged with protecting the people from foreign threats and resolving their internal disputes with wisdom and justice. Later, during the time of the Jewish Monarchy, the *Kings* of Judah and Israel were supposed to take on the role of shepherd, serving as just rulers and models of piety for the people. Unfortunately, many of them failed miserably, ignoring the needs of the poor and leading the people into idolatry. As a result, they displeased God and incurred the wrath of numerous prophets. The Exile to Babylon brought an end to the Monarchy and prompted the rise of the rabbinical tradition, making *religious leaders* the new shepherds of Israel. After the return from Exile, the chief priests, elders and scribes became responsible for guiding the people in the way of God’s commandments, while most of their kings served as little more than vassals of foreign occupiers.

In today’s gospel, *Jesus* claims the title of Shepherd for himself, and he accuses the religious leaders of his day of being nothing more than “thieves and robbers,” imposters who wish to exploit the sheep for their own benefit. Jesus’ claim is so audacious, and his criticism so bold, that the Pharisees don’t even grasp what Jesus is saying about himself and about them. He is blatantly usurping their authority as the appointed shepherds of Israel, declaring that *he alone is worthy* to lead this flock. The rabbis who came before him are unworthy because their main concern is *not* the welfare of the sheep, but rather, the respect, honors and obedience which *they demand from the sheep*. Jesus, by contrast, was sent into the world for a *single purpose* – to give up his life in order to save the flock from their sins and give them the hope of eternal life.

 In our day, God continues to raise up shepherds from among his people. (In fact, I recently celebrated twenty years as a shepherd of the Lord’s flock.) However, both shepherds and sheep must always remember that *Christ is the one Divine Shepherd* who leads us all. The people follow us earthly shepherds, and we lead them to Christ. That is the vocation of an ordained minister, in a nutshell. Jesus says that he calls his sheep by name, and they recognize his voice and follow him. That is precisely what happens when we priests proclaim Christ’s message faithfully to the people, speaking his unvarnished truth at all times. It takes courage, though, because sometimes the unvarnished truth of the Gospel is not what people want to hear. Some would prefer a more lenient Gospel, to justify their complacency. Others want a harsher, more judgmental Gospel, rather than one that constantly challenges them to be merciful. Still others would like a Gospel that does not expose the hypocrisy of their prejudices or their political views. But, the shepherd’s task is not to cater to other people’s opinions nor to impose his own opinions. His task is always to let the voice of the Divine Shepherd be heard, so that none may be led astray.

The sheep remain safe and secure as long as they hear the Divine Shepherd’s voice and follow him. So, we must be careful not to allow the noise of the world and the deceptive calls of false shepherds to drown out the voice of the true Shepherd. We also must be willing to follow wherever the Good Shepherd leads us, placing all our trust in him. At times, we can’t be sure whether a verdant pasture is right around the corner, or if he’s going to lead us through more dark valleys first. If we become fearful and turn back, then we just make things harder for ourselves. It is always better to rely on Him than to try to cope with all of life’s problems on our own. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, knows how to lead us securely and care for us along the way.

At the end of today’s gospel, Jesus adds a little twist by calling himself not just the Shepherd, but also the *gate* of the sheepfold, the passage by which the sheep can “come in and go out and find pasture.” In other words, Jesus is the way to freedom and salvation. As he says: “I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.” Note, however, that Jesus doesn’t just *open* the gate to eternal life and *direct* the sheep to pass through it; he himself *is* the gate. If he merely opened the gate by means of his sacrifice on the cross, and called the sheep out by means of his teachings, then salvation could be achieved simply by following those teachings and living a good, moral life. But if Jesus himself *is the gate*, then the way to salvation entails more than just following his instruction. We, the members of the flock, must seek *communion with him*. This is another way of expressing the idea of the vine and the branches. In order to have life, we must remain in Christ, and he must remain in us. And that means more than just obeying his commands, but also approaching him with love and devotion. May all of us, sheep and shepherds alike, bind ourselves closely to Jesus, our Good Shepherd and our gateway to eternal life. Let us strive to listen to his voice, follow his lead, and live in communion with him always.