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

**May 8, 2022**

**St. Bavo Parish**

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

*First Reading: Acts 13:14, 43-52 (Paul and Barnabas attract many Gentiles to the faith.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 100 (We are his people, the sheep of his flock.)*

*Second Reading: Revelation 7:9, 14b-17 (The great multitude worshipping in heaven.)*

*Gospel: John 10:27-30 (My sheep hear my voice and they follow me.)*

Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish.” Amen, alleluia! But, who exactly are these people whom Jesus calls, “my sheep”? For many of his first disciples, the most obvious answer seemed to be, “the Jewish people.” There are numerous Old Testament passages which refer to God as a divine Shepherd and the Chosen People of Israel as *his flock*. It seems like a fitting image, considering all the ways that God has cared for and guided his people over the centuries of their special, covenantal relationship. In addition, God also provided many *human* shepherds to watch over his people. For example, the Psalmists and Prophets spoke of Israel’s *kings* as shepherds of the people, for they were anointed by God to share in his pastoral care of the nation. Chief among those anointed shepherds would be the long-awaited Messiah. When he finally came, he was supposed to lead God’s faithful people into a new era of freedom and security, like a shepherd leading his flock to safe, verdant pastures. In fact, the gospel passage that we heard today comes from a discourse in the Gospel of John in which Jesus calls himself “the Good Shepherd,” who lays down his life for his sheep. Nevertheless, many of the Jewish people did not accept Jesus. As soon as he declares himself to be their Messiah and Good Shepherd, division immediately arises between those who believe that Jesus is their Savior and those who think that he’s possessed by the Devil.

That division among the Jewish people only deepened after Jesus’ death and resurrection. The Apostles initially tried to win over their fellow Jews, thinking that all would come to believe in the Risen Lord after hearing their eyewitness testimony. They had no intention of forming a whole *new* flock of believers to follow a new religion. Rather, they expected God’s traditional flock, those who believed in the one true God of Israel, to rally around the One sent by the Father to be their new Shepherd and eternal King. Once the people heard the truth, they would recognize the voice of their Shepherd and follow him. That was the plan. But, as we saw in the Acts of the Apostles, that vision of Christianity as simply the fulfillment of Judaism was soundly rejected by the vast majority of the Jewish people. At the same time, Paul and Barnabas discovered that a *new flock* of believers was emerging. *The Gentiles* began to embrace the Gospel with great enthusiasm. Surprisingly, *they* somehow heard Jesus’ voice and followed him, believing in the promise of eternal life. And so, it seemed that a new Church and a whole new religion was taking shape, one that revered the ancient covenant and upheld God’s commandments, but found their identity in something else. The bond that held this flock together was not a common religious or ethnic heritage, but a common *belief in Jesus Christ* as the Son of God and the Savior of the world.

Paul and Barnabas saw Divine Providence at work in this new development. They recalled the prophecy of Isaiah which suggested that the Messiah would become a “light to the nations” and an “instrument of salvation to the ends of the earth.” In the mind of the Prophet, that light would draw Gentiles to Jerusalem, where they would convert to Judaism. They would join the Lord’s flock, and the Law of Moses would be their guide to salvation. Now, it seemed that God had found another way to reach all the nations. The Apostles and other Christian missionaries would spread *the light of Christ*. Salvation would spread to all corners of the earth through the conversion of the Gentiles to *Christianity*, not to Judaism. Thus, in John’s vision in the Book of Revelation, the great multitude gathered around the throne of the Lamb is “from every nation, race, people and tongue.” They are all the people who have “washed their robes and made them white *in the blood of the Lamb*.” In other words, this multitude represents all the people throughout the world who have come to believe in salvation *through the blood of Christ*, not through observance of the Mosaic Law. They have heard the voice of the Good Shepherd and have followed him, in some cases, even to martyrdom. The whole flock is united. They are gathered as one around the heavenly throne to worship with one voice and one faith.

So, it is certainly possible that when Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice and they follow me,” he is describing how the people who have come to believe in him respond to his teachings and his call to follow the Christian way of life. However, there might be another legitimate way to interpret Jesus’ pronouncement. He could be *defining* what makes people members of his flock in the first place. The ones whom he considers “*his sheep*“ are all those who have heard his voice and have chosen to follow him, regardless of where they came from or how they first heard the Good News of the Kingdom. All are welcome to join Jesus’ flock, and all who join receive an equal share in the promise of salvation. Some of the early Christians really struggled with that idea, because it granted Gentile converts equal status with Jews in the Christian community. Imagine that – former pagans being equal to the children of the covenant! But, in truth, God shows no partiality to those who accept Christ and follow him faithfully. Over the centuries, the Lord’s flock expanded to encompass the whole earth, realizing John’s vision of one Church, made up of people from all nations, races, peoples and tongues.

In the 1960’s, however, the fathers of the Second Vatican Council realized that our understanding of the Lord’s flock, though quite expansive, was still too limited. Since the thirteenth century, Catholics had identified the Lord’s flock with the *Roman Catholic Church*, declaring that there was no salvation outside the Catholic faith. The Council fathers corrected that error. First, they reimagined the Church as the “People of God” and a “mystery” that transcends the human structures that make up the institutional Church. In other words, membership in the Lord’s flock is not strictly limited to those who profess the Catholic faith. Second, they also taught that divine truth and the means to achieve salvation can be found in other Christian churches and, to some extent, even in non-Christian religions. Hence, the path to salvation may not be as narrow and exclusive as we once thought. The Lord, who desires the salvation of all, will use *every* means at his disposal to gather his flock and save them.