

Fr. Nick Dant's Homily, Saint Matthew Catholic Church, Indianapolis
Fourth Sunday of Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday, April 24-25, 2021, Cycle B

"I am the Good Shepherd," Jesus says! "A Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Jesus laying down his life for us is just what we celebrated with the Easter Triduum of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter. We, the sheep, were endangered by the wolf of evil and sin, and Jesus, the Good Shepherd threw himself right at the wolf – so we could live.

Jesus is indeed the Good Shepherd. Yet, on one Good Shepherd Sunday some years ago a New Zealand preacher proclaimed from the pulpit: "I hate this gospel passage about Jesus the Good Shepherd." Now, why would that New Zealand minister say he hates the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd? Well, I don't know how many of you are familiar with New Zealand, but New Zealand is a country with a huge sheep population. Shepherding and raising sheep is a big industry in New Zealand. At the time our preacher was a pastor, New Zealand had a population of some 60 million sheep and only three million people. Raising sheep was a cornerstone industry of the New Zealand economy. New Zealanders became quite familiar with the "ways" of sheep.

That minister and his fellow New Zealanders knew that sheep were not very bright animals. Sheep are rather docile; mindlessly following after whoever herds them. What the minister was objecting to was not the metaphor of Jesus as a shepherd! He was rejecting the notion of portraying, ourselves, Jesus' disciples, as dumb, mindless sheep, who really do not think very much on their own. I would say if Jesus is calling on us to be His dumb, mindless followers, who put aside our powers of reasoning, then we all should be resentful of the Good Shepherd passages from the Gospel of John.

However, Jesus's use of the Shepherd-sheep metaphor is not to teach us that we disciples are dumb and mindless incapable of using our brains. Jesus is emphasizing more the role of Shepherd than that of the flock. Jesus is trying to portray the depth of his devotion to our wellbeing as his disciples. In Jesus' day shepherd and sheep literally lived with each other; their relationship was rather intense. The shepherd walked with his sheep, ate with his sheep, and slept at the gate of the sheepfold. The shepherd literally spent his life with and for the sheep. The sheep in turn provided for the shepherd's livelihood through their wool and meat. The shepherd and sheep came to know each other intimately – so much so that the sheep would recognize the sound of their shepherd's voice, and they would follow no other voice, for that voice meant protection, life and food.

Recognizing the shepherd's voice was extremely helpful. In the evening all the shepherds in a local area would herd their sheep into one common pen for protection during the night. When morning came, and it was time for each shepherd to gather his flock, he would use his voice to call them out, and the sheep, recognizing their shepherd's voice, would follow. Again, Jesus is not saying that we are dumb and need to be led around. What Jesus is saying is as sheep recognize the voice of their particular shepherd, we too should develop so intimate a relationship with Jesus that we recognize the voice of the one who loves us and lays his life down for us that we might live. The voice of such a one we should want to follow!

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Jesus' emphasis in the Good Shepherd – sheep metaphor is on what the Good Shepherd does and will do for his flock – even to the point of using his very life to defend his sheep from mortal danger.

Good Shepherd Sunday is also World Day of prayer for vocations. When you think about it, praying for vocations to the priesthood the diaconate and religious life – are saying I want to walk in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus as the Good Shepherd and help him in his ministry of shepherding His flock. We desperately need people to say “yes” to Jesus' invitation to share in a special way his role of Good Shepherd. Please pray that good, holy, men and women will generously respond to the call of priesthood, the diaconate, and religious life, and be the face of Jesus the Good Shepherd, laying down their lives for the sheep. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, laid down His life for us, and we His sheep, now live a new life.

Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!!!