

Homily for Fourth Sunday of Easter, 2021

The core message of Our Faith is the Death and Resurrection of Christ. We cannot long speak of His saving death for us, without also speaking of the event that gives it power and meaning – His Resurrection. We cannot long speak of the New Life in Christ, without also making it clear that the way to the Resurrection is the Cross.

In both Lent and Easter, when we focus in on one of these two – the other is still right beside it. They are of one fabric – they proclaim each other. For instance, last week, Christ's Resurrection appearance entailed showing the disciples the wounds in His hands and feet.

We cannot long preach a prosperity Gospel without also speaking of picking up our cross and following Our Lord. We cannot long preach on being suffering servants without preaching the reason for service – the promise of New Life in the Resurrection.

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We had First Communions last weekend. First Communions are always a good time to speak of all Christ gives us. They are a time of remembering what gifts we receive in the Eucharist – the peace, the joy, the promise, the healing, and the strength. Good Shepherd Sunday is a great time to reflect on Christ who cares for each of us lambs, on being fed, and on all that God bestows on us who are His flock. One parish I served in always had First Communions on this Sunday, Good Shepherd Sunday.

But because of that, when the readings were like those we hear today, it was hard to preach the other half of the message: that the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep; that we, His disciples, are to imitate Him and not just be a hired person who sees the wolf and runs away, leaving Christ's flock unprotected.

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Today, it is worth noting that part of being members of the flock of the Good Shepherd includes the cross.

The Cross is often lived out in small uncomfortable ways that are easy to avoid. I am reading a book on the priesthood where the author tells little stories of priests who fall into temptations such as thinking they are the savior, or they need to be skeptical, or always need to have a smile on their faces.

One story painted the picture of a priest who was technically true to his vow of celibacy. But he developed exclusive friendships with families that allowed him to avoid that certain amount of alone-ness (not loneliness) which is needed to turn to the one who we all need to develop our first relationship with – Christ.

For this particular chapter – the point is that God’s shepherds have to live what we preach. We preach that the silence and aloneness and self-emptying of prayer is sometimes experienced as a cross we must carry in order to receive the new life of closeness with Christ that is only found in prayer.

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Being a shepherd is a giving simply for the sake of giving - out of love.

There is a little video that was passed around social media last week. It was of a lamb stuck head-first in a long crack by the side of a road. A young boy spent a minute pulling at the leg of the lamb, and lifted it out of the crack. The lamb immediately ran back and forth, and ten yards away jumped over the crack and - landed head first again stuck in the crack.

The heading I saw was, “When you promise to go and sin no more and immediately do the same sin all over again.” For the purpose of today, the video also begs the question of how often the young shepherd has to pull the sheep out of trouble. Parents do this regularly for their children.

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The way to Life is crucifixion. There is sacrifice involved in loving God first and in spending our lives for the other person.

Today, we are called to be committed to Christ, who first committed Himself to us. The gentle shepherd is the crucified one. He cares for us to His death – that we might have new life. He gives His life abundantly to us. We are to abundantly give His life to others, to spend ours, as He did.

Again, parents do this regularly. This is why parents will always be a primary image and inspiration for vocations to those called to be shepherds in the Church.