

## John 10:1-18

So far in John's gospel, Jesus has been revealing his love for people. On Sunday we looked at his healing of the man born blind. Previously, he announced his secret, his desire to live in each person through the gift of his Body and his Blood. Now he reveals himself as the shepherd of a flock, who is filled with an extraordinary love and tenderness. Shepherds care deeply for those entrusted to them. But caring is not coddling or protecting: caring implies firmness, helping people to make clear choices. We are called to be shepherds, we are called to help others to grow to fulfilment in faith and in life.

Jesus reveals that he is the Good Shepherd. Although the word "good" is used in most translations, it does not capture the nuances of the original Greek. The Greek word can be translated as "noble", beautiful", "perfect", "precious" or even "wonderful". So whenever the familiar phrase "good shepherd" is heard, try translating it as "wonderful shepherd" – or simply "*the*" shepherd.

Jesus, and those listening to him, were well aware of the importance of shepherds in their rural setting, and what shepherding meant in the history of the Israelites. The Lord was the Shepherd who had led the Israelites to freedom through the Red Sea, nourished them in the desert, and guided and led them through the desert to the promised land. He showed them a way of life in the ten commandments that were needed in order to live and to reach fulfilment. Throughout their history, the Lord had given the Israelites shepherds to lead them: Moses, Joshua, David,

Solomon, the prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel, and many others. In Isaiah we read: *“Like a shepherd, God will tend the flock; he will gather lambs in his arms and lift them onto his lap. He will gently guide the nursing ewes.”*

Shepherding is about caring for those who are weak, lost and in need. It's about presence, love and support. Shepherds are needed as much today as they were in the time of Jesus, to love people and guide them to greater life.

Children know that they need their parents to feed them, care for them, love them, look after them, protect them, guide them and help them grow up. Those who are not totally self-sufficient need kind, compassionate and competent people, as well as good teachers, to help them develop. Young adults need role models who will help them mature and make good choices. All of us who want to deepen spiritually and grow in a life of love and prayer need a spiritual parent who will help us on this road. Many people who feel lonely and lost in our rich, materialistic societies are looking for people who will guide them in a good and healthy life and help them to find meaning to their lives. Aren't we all looking for people who really care for us, understand us, respect us?

Jesus, the Word made flesh, knows how much we all need good, loving and wise shepherds so that we may develop a fuller human and spiritual maturity. Not only does Jesus reveal himself as the Good and Wonderful Shepherd, but each one of us, as we grow to maturity is called to be a good shepherd, a servant-leader for others.

In order to be real shepherds who lead others, we have to learn first of all to be good followers. Jesus is revealed as the “Lamb of God” before he reveals that he is the Good Shepherd. He listens to the Father and obeys the Father before revealing to us what to do. To be good parents, don’t we first of all have to be good sons and daughters? Can we reach others if we have not learned from others? How can we love if we have not been loved?

Some people have never experienced the love and care of others. Their parents hurt them, abused them, and did not help them to grow to freedom. Will these hurting people find substitute parents, people in later life who will understand and appreciate them and reveal to them the person they are and the person they are called to be, help them uncover the person who is hidden under a lot of inner pain, guilt or violence?

Jesus, the Light of the world, calls his disciples to become light for the world. Jesus the Good Shepherd, calls us to become good shepherds to mature spiritually, to help others in need and to seek out those who are lost, crushed or oppressed, who have been pushed to the margins of society.

Jesus reveals to us the qualities of good shepherds: *“He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. After he has gathered his own flock, he walks ahead of them, and they follow him because they know his voice. They won’t follow a stranger; they will run from him because they don’t know his voice.”* Shepherds are the ones who lead those who have been entrusted to them to inner freedom – the

freedom to make good choices, to take initiative, and to grow to greater maturity and love.

In biblical language, to know someone by name implies a growing understanding of a person, of his or her unique gifts and weaknesses, needs and mission in life. That means taking time with the person, listening, and above all creating a mutual relationship of communion, revealing to that person that he or she is loved, has value and is precious. One can only guide someone if there is no desire to possess, control or manipulate the other, if mutual trust, respect and love have been born between the two.

Trust is the basis for all shepherding and all education. A man working with street youth explained that, he is unable to help any of them until trust is born, trust that he is there because he cares for them more than for his salary. Trust can only come if the shepherds are good models, living what they teach, showing the way by the way they live, act and love. Double messages, where a person does not live what they say, break trust.

Real shepherds, true shepherds, give of themselves freely; their love and caring communicate life to those who are weaker and immature. That is why Jesus says: "My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep." Jesus loves us abundantly and wants to give us all we need to grow in wisdom and greater human and spiritual maturity.

Being a good shepherd does not mean being perfect, after all, no one is perfect. Being a good shepherd is being humble and open, recognizing one's faults and compulsions and asking for forgiveness when one has not acted justly. Parents need to ask forgiveness of their children if they have been too angry, too demanding, or unjust towards them. All those in a role of leadership are called to be a model of forgiveness. We cannot help others to grow to greater maturity if we ourselves are not seeking to grow in greater maturity, compassion and acceptance of self and of others.

In contrast to the good shepherd, Jesus compares thieves and bandits, who flee in the face of difficulties or danger. These *false* shepherds are more concerned with salaries, reputations, structures, administration and the success of the group than people and their inner growth and freedom. They *use* people because of their need to have power and control over them, and to prove their superiority. They fear personal contact and hide behind rules and regulations. They prevent others from growing to freedom and from taking initiatives. They are hard on weaker people and lack compassion. They do not try to understand people but rather tend to judge and condemn others. In the face of conflict they leave people lost and alone, and not knowing what to do. They are absorbed with their own needs.

To become a good shepherd, a wonderful shepherd, is to come out of the shell of selfishness in order to be attentive to those for whom we are responsible, to reveal to them their fundamental beauty and value and help them to grow and become fully alive.

Here we touch the fundamental difference between *productivity* and *fruitfulness*, between *making an inanimate object*, such as a piece of furniture and *transmitting life*. When we make an object, it is ours. We can discard it or do with it what we like. This is not so with people; if we are bonded to a weak person or to someone whom God has given to us in friendship, in responsibility, in accompaniment or in community, we cannot discard them or do what we like with them. They have been entrusted to us and we carry some responsibility for them. It is not easy to be a good shepherd, to really listen, to accept another's reality, pain, and conflicts. It is not easy to touch our own fears and blocks in relation to people, or to love people to life. It is a challenge to help the other to gradually accept responsibility for their own life, to trust themselves, to become less and less dependent on us and more dependent on Jesus, the Good, the Wonderful Shepherd.

At different stages in our lives we need people to be more or less close to us. When people are totally weak or lost, they need a shepherd who is close to them and who looks after them. Little by little, as people discover who they are and become more mature, the shepherd becomes more of a friend and companion rather than a parent figure. A parent treats an adolescent differently than a child of five.

Becoming fully human does not mean becoming completely autonomous, in the sense of doing everything on our own. This can turn us into ourselves. Rather, we are called to be open: needing each other, doing things together, in wonderment of the beauty of others. Shepherding has its source and goal in communion. It

involves serving each other, being humble, putting others first, giving our lives.

Jesus wants to give life to us all: *“I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice my life for the sheep.”* To give one’s life can have three meanings: It can mean *communicating to another* all that is precious and that gives us life so that others may live this gift as well. It can mean *giving oneself to another* in total trust and love. It can also mean *risking my life* by throwing myself into the raging waters to save someone who is drowning.

Jesus came to give life and to give his life, the life of love and light that he was living with the Father. He came to give his life on the cross, to take away all the blocks that prevent us from being in communion with God and with our fellow human beings. Jesus is the Gift of God and calls us to let go of the things that prevent us from giving ourselves. *“So I sacrifice my life for the sheep. I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd. The Father loves me because I sacrifice my life so I may take it back again. No one can take my life from me. I sacrifice it voluntarily. For I have the authority to lay it down when I want to and also to take it up again.”*

Jesus yearns for unity between all people. He came to break down the barriers that separate people and to bring them together. This unity has its source in the unity he lives with God, for the Son and the Father are one. This unity between people will

flow from the gift of life, the gift of *his* life.

As we pray and reflect on our way through John's gospel, we see that the dark clouds of death are looming. The religious authorities want to kill Jesus. We are approaching a terrifying conflict. Here Jesus is revealing a deeper meaning to death. He came to give life and to give his life freely, so that people might live and find freedom. His death is not the end of life but the culmination of life; it is the greatest act of love that gives life and becomes a gateway to a fullness of life. The sting of death has been conquered.

Rabindranath Tagore, humanist, universalist, internationalist, and ardent anti-nationalist, the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, was known for his poetry and novels. He wrote: "*Death is not extinguishing the light but merely putting out the lamp because the dawn has come.*"

There are, of course, tragic deaths through wars and accidents. There are sicknesses that bring death at an early age. The death of those whose lives have come to an end after a full life can be painful for those who are left behind, but it is a passage to God and into eternal peace. Their time has come.

As children they received life; they lived life as young people, they gave life as parents or as people who communicate life to others through their commitment and love; as old people they gave life to others through their presence and love. The joy of human beings is to leave this earth having given life to others who in turn are called to give life to another generation. Isn't this the cycle of life on our earth?

Spring brings leaves and flowers. Summer brings maturity. Then comes autumn, when the harvest of grain and fruits is picked and eaten to give life. The leaves fall, and nourish the earth, also to give new life. Then there is the silence of winter, a time of waiting for new life to rise up. The Good, the Wonderful, “the” Shepherd leads us into this cycle of life where we are called to receive and to give life.

We are called to become true shepherds, like Jesus, with all his tenderness and capacity for forgiveness, with his capacity to help people to rise up; and for this we need the Holy Spirit. If we are to become shepherds like Jesus and give our lives, we need to have our hearts of stone transformed into hearts of flesh; we need to receive the Holy Spirit. Since we have God’s help to be good shepherds, it is also necessary to be good sheep. We ourselves must be obedient to the Holy Spirit and to our community in order to help others to become fully themselves in their mission in their family, their community, and in the Church.

Amen.