

4 Sunday Easter Year A Good Shepherd Sunday – A Reflection



This Sunday is traditionally Good Shepherd Sunday with its Gospel taken from John chapter 10 where we have Jesus' statement "I am the good shepherd." In our Gospel reading today we find the closely related declaration, introduced by Jesus' words that underline its importance for him: "Amen, amen I say to you" "I am the gate." Or "I am the gate of the sheep-enclosure."

Jesus is the good shepherd because of his intimacy to us - the good shepherd knows his sheep and the sheep know him. They recognise his voice and he guarantees their security, indeed, their very existence.

The 19th century cultural historian William Thompson has left us his first-hand account of the Palestinian shepherd's relationship with his flock, a relationship, it seems, that has remained basically unchanged since Jesus' time:

"The shepherd calls sharply from time to time, to remind the sheep of his presence. They know his voice, and follow on; but, if a stranger calls, they stop short, lift up their heads in alarm, and if it is repeated, they turn and flee, because they know not the voice of a stranger."

Thomson comments. "I have made the experiment repeatedly." We see Jesus portrayed as the good shepherd in a scene from John's Gospel on the first Easter morning at the empty tomb. There Mary Magdalene recognises the Risen Jesus only when he calls her by name. At first she thought she was talking to the gardener. It was only when Jesus addressed her as Mary that she recognised him.

Historians tell us that "the image of the Good Shepherd is the most common found in the Roman catacombs before Christian imagery could be made explicit" because of the constant threat of persecution. Thus "Christian art [drew on] imagery that was shared with [the surrounding] pagan culture but had a special meaning for [them]." Significantly, the earliest "image showed a young man carrying a lamb round his neck." It was the image of the Good Shepherd, the Risen Christ who, in St Paul's words, "gathers up all things in himself" for "in him we gain our inheritance."

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