

## 4th Sunday of Easter, Year A

The key image of today's readings is Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The Responsorial Psalm pictures God as a Shepherd guiding his people through the wilderness. In the Second Reading Peter recalls the suffering of Jesus and concludes with joy: 'You had gone astray like sheep but now you have come back to the shepherd and guardian of your souls'. Jesus uses the same image in the parable recorded in today's Gospel.

Often in our life we behave like sheep. We move because everyone around us is moving – and anyhow we don't often have much choice. Times are changing and the pressures on us are real. We feel pushed and pulled by people and events, and we are pressured to move with the times. It is easy to feel bewildered. It is easy to get tangled in the briars along the path and very easy to lose sight of or be quite confused about the goal. Where are we headed? What really matters? What's it all about? And so we experience the need of the Good Shepherd. We need him to guide us, to rescue us, to carry us.

Of the many beautiful statements in these readings, the one on which I wish to focus is the concluding statement in the Gospel: 'I have come that you may live and live to the full' (John 10:10). The first question we have to ask ourselves is: Do I really believe that? Some of our early religious education may have left us with the idea that God is a strict disciplinarian who wants us to live with him in heaven in the next world, but in the meantime is against many things that seem natural and attractive. We imagine God as watching us to test us, even to catch us out. Only if we pass the strict test will he reward us later on in the next life with happiness. This life is meant to be a valley of tears and we are not meant to enjoy it or to find real life here on earth.

That is a terribly wrong image of God. Certainly we have to learn discipline. Certainly we need to resist falling prey to our whims and to the pressure of our peers or the enticement of quick, easy, short-lived pleasure that can do untold harm to us and to others. Our parents and teachers recognised that a young person is like a young plant that needs to be protected and guided. But this is so that we will live to the full, not so as to curtail our life. If you smash a violin it will not be able to play properly. If you break the glass to get at the wine, you will spill it and never enjoy its taste. Each of us has a beautiful soul and a very delicate and special way of loving. We can hurt our soul and thank God there are those who know us, and who in love try to protect us from harm. This can

happen at any time but we are particularly vulnerable when we are young.

We need to learn self-discipline, and God who loves us assists us in this by his grace, for God is love. Everything in Jesus' life is there to persuade us that God really is love and Jesus does want us to live to the full. If we believe that then we are to ask the same question that the crowd asks Peter in today's First Reading: What are we to do?

Peter lists three things. Firstly we are to repent. Like sheep that have strayed we have to recognise that we are off the track, that we are lost, that we don't know where to turn and that, even if we knew the way, we are too tired, too scared, too confused, too trapped to take it. We have to want to change and we have to cry out for help from the shepherd. In the Second Reading Peter speaks of Jesus: 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When he was abused he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly'. Jesus is the model who shows us how we are to change. He is the one who shares his life with us to enable us to live as his disciples.

Hence the second step mentioned by Peter: we are to be baptised. By being baptised we join Jesus and the community of his disciples. This requires an act of faith in Jesus as the way to God and so to life. Some of you made this decision as adults. Many of us were placed in Jesus' arms as a baby. What a gift that was! But now as adults we have to own that decision for ourselves. Peter says that we are baptised 'for the forgiveness of sin'. We sin when we stray off the path, when we miss the mark. Since Jesus is the way, when we are united to him we are lifted out of our sin. 'By his wounds you have been healed'(Second Reading); that is to say, by the loving way in which he accepted his suffering, he shows us how to live and by the love which he poured out on us from his heart opened on the cross, he opened our hearts to receive God's healing grace, and so 'to live and to live to the full'(Gospel).The main reason we are here today at this Mass is to be in communion with Jesus and with the community of his disciples.

Thirdly, we must open our hearts to receive the Holy Spirit. It is this aspect on which I would like to concentrate here in this homily. The Spirit of which Peter is speaking is Jesus' own Spirit, the Spirit of love that unites him to his Father. This is the gift that Jesus gave us from the cross when the soldiers pierced his heart. When Jesus appeared to his friends on the day of the Resurrection, he breathed on them and said: 'Receive the Holy Spirit'. Saint Paul describes this core experience of the Christian life when he writes: 'God's love has been poured into

our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5).

This is that spring of living water that wells up inside us – the gift promised by Jesus to the woman at the well. As disciples of Jesus everything we do comes from this spring. Our prayer is Jesus' prayer welling up inside us. Our love is his love moving our hearts. Our hope is his hope. Our faith is his faith – till all our feelings and attitudes, our thoughts and desires and intentions are transformed into his. We are to be the heart of Jesus in this world, and the transformation that is taking place within us is the gift of the Holy Spirit of God's love.

In the book of Exodus we read the following description of the artists who were responsible for building and adorning the temple: 'Moses said to the Israelites: See, the Lord has called by name Bezalel of the tribe of Judah; he has filled him with divine spirit, with skill, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft. And he has inspired him to teach' (Exodus 35:30-34).

If this is true of the skill this man had, it is true of every gift which each of us has – gifts that are given us by the Spirit to build and adorn our world, and to build community. Paul reminds us of the varied gifts that God has given to each person whom he has united to his Son: 'Speaking and doing the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love' (Ephesians 4:15-16).

This gift of the Spirit is God's most precious gift. It is the gift for which our hearts most long. The Gospel tells us that after Jesus was baptised, he was at prayer and the Holy Spirit came down upon him. He experienced an overwhelming sense of his Father's love: 'You are my Son the one I love, the one in whom my soul delights'. This was at the beginning of his public ministry. Imagine the love between Jesus and his Father at the end when God took his Son from the cross into his eternal embrace! This is the gift that Jesus shares with his followers.

John speaks of this when he tells us of the blood and water flowing from Jesus' pierced heart, and when Jesus comes to his disciples on the day of his resurrection and breathes into them his Holy Spirit. Luke focuses on the Jewish feast of Pentecost. After Jesus' Ascension, Mary and the disciples were gathered in prayer when Jesus poured out upon them the Spirit of love that he received at

his death. The Spirit came down upon them in tongues of fire, filling their souls with love and energising them to go out and attract people to Jesus. This Easter season is a special time for prayer that our parish community will be open to a powerful release of the Spirit of Jesus upon us all, including those who are thinking of 'returning home', of rejoining the Catholic community, and those who are thinking of joining the community through baptism.

Our world will experience healing and reconciliation only when we learn to open ourselves to this precious gift coming from the heart of Jesus. Let us open our own hearts and pray and work that others will do the same.