

Homily notes from Canon Philip Dyson
Sunday 25th April 2021 - 4th Sunday of Easter
(Vocations Sunday). Readings (Year B): 1st: Acts 4:8-12. Psalm
117. 2nd: 1 John 3:1-2. Gospel: John 10:11-18.

Here in front of me (*in church*) you see a copy of the design of the logo from the front cover of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, taken from a Christian tombstone in the catacombs of Domitilla in Rome, which dates from the end of the 3rd century A.D.

The pastoral image, of pagan origin, which was used by Christians to symbolise the rest and happiness that the soul of the departed finds in eternal life. This image also suggests certain characteristic aspects of this Catechism: Christ the Good Shepherd, who leads and protects his faithful (*the lamb*) by his authority (*the staff*) draws them by the melodious symphony of the truth (*the panpipes*) and makes them lie down in the shade of the ***'tree of life,' his redeeming Cross which opens paradise.'***

We're very familiar with the image of Jesus the Good Shepherd. In the early church before Jesus was depicted as suffering and dying on the cross, he was depicted as 'The Good Shepherd,' an image that was central to early Christian identity. Very early mosaics show Jesus the Good Shepherd. The most familiar Psalm is 'The Lord is my shepherd;' and used on so many occasions throughout life.

While the shepherd/sheep metaphor is found throughout Scripture, in the Synoptic gospels, (Matt. Mark & Luke) Jesus is the shepherd who feeds the people with his teaching and shows his care by seeking out the lost sheep. Here in John's gospel the emphasis is on the self-sacrificing devotion of Jesus in contrast to those religious leaders who used their position to have power and to feather their own nests. Jesus called himself the good or true shepherd in contrast to these false leaders.

Jesus' vow to lay down his life for his sheep was something new and likely shocking to his audience. Of course that image becomes clear in light of the resurrection. But ancient shepherds did not sacrifice

their own lives for the sheep, even if they were their own. Jesus lays down his life for us his sheep, and is therefore rightly called the Good Shepherd.

The context of this saying of Jesus is important. It was in the Temple in Jerusalem, at the Feast of Dedication. During the feast the words of Ezekiel about the shepherds of Israel were read aloud: “Son of Man, speak on my behalf against the shepherds of Israel. Woe to the shepherds who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? “Ezekiel complained that these self-seeking leaders had allowed the flock to be scattered but God would send a true shepherd who would gather back the strays into one flock.

In contrast to the careless shepherds, Jesus emphasised three positive quantities of his own pastoral care:

He lays down his life for the sheep
He knows his sheep and is known by them
He gathers them into one flock.

The Church today is still reeling from the few ‘shepherds’ who have in different ways abused their office and calling. It is no comfort to know this has happened throughout history. It shouldn’t.

Alongside it are the thousands of bishops, priests and religious who are faithful, and some who do even literally imitate Jesus to the extent of laying down their lives. Think of Archbishop Oscar Romero, or the Chaldean Archbishop of Mosul: the number of martyrs in history, those in Iraq/ Syria etc. in recent times.

Today, on Vocations Sunday, as we pray for more vocations to the priesthood and religious life, and that they may be faithful and good shepherds bearing fruit in plenty, pray too for all called to leadership of any kind in the Church.

One of the Prefaces of Apostles in the Mass says: *“For you, eternal Shepherd, do not desert your flock, but through the blessed Apostles watch over it and protect it always, so that it may be governed by those you have appointed shepherds to lead it in the name of your Son.”*

Our lives are filled with noise, distractions, calamities that drown out the voice we need to hear: the voice of calm, the voice of reason, the voice of assurance, the voice of unconditional and unqualified love; the voice of Jesus our Good Shepherd, the Risen Lord.

Canon Philip Dyson