

Second Sunday of Easter, 2008

“I am the Good Shepherd; I am the way, the truth and the life; I am the Good Shepherd, and I know mine; and mine know Me.”

(John 10:11–18)

If we ponder those words of Christ we surely must recognise the depth of meaning for us and for mankind as a whole. Just to think upon the clause “Mine know me”, the question immediately arises, Just how much do I know Christ in his fullness, God and Man, the new Adam, Priest and King, our Redeemer and our Judge — yet still the Shepherd and guide of our souls?



Writing on this very subject, Pope Benedict XIV tells us that it is the image Jesus uses to explain His mission in the Gospels; and that it has a long history behind it. In the ancient Near East, in royal inscriptions from both Sumer and the area of Babylonia and Assyria, the king refers to himself as the shepherd, instituted by God. “Pasturing Sheep” is an image of himself as a ruler. The image implies that caring for the weak is one of the tasks of the just ruler. One could therefore say that, in view of its origins, the image of Christ the Good Shepherd is a Gospel of Christ the King, an image that sheds light upon the Kingship of Christ. Of course the immediate precedents for Jesus’ use of the image are found in the Old Testament, where God Himself appears as the Shepherd of Israel. The image deeply shaped Israel’s piety, and it was especially in times of need that Israel found a word of consolation and confidence in it. Probably the most beautiful expression of trustful devotion is Psalm 23: *The Lord is my Shepherd ... even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for Thou art with me.* The image of God as Shepherd is more fully developed in chapters 34–37 of Ezekiel, whose vision is brought into the present and interpreted as a prophecy of Jesus’ ministry both in the shepherd parables of the three Gospels and in St John’s Shepherd discourse. Faced with the self-seeking shepherds of his own day, whom he challenges and accuses, Ezekiel proclaims the promise that God Himself will seek out His sheep and care for them. “And I will bring them out from the peoples, and gather them from the countries, and will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will watch over.”

We know well the account of the Good Shepherd seeking the sheep that was lost, and the other parables. Through them Jesus puts this question to His adversaries: “Have

you not read God's word in Ezekiel? I am only doing what God the true Shepherd foretold: I wish to seek out the sheep that are lost and bring the strayed back home."

Again at a late stage in the Old Testament the image of the Shepherd takes yet another surprising and thought-provoking turn that leads directly to the mystery of Jesus Christ. Matthew tells us that in His last discourse to the Apostles on the way to Gethsemane, Jesus reminds them of the prophecy in Zechariah 13.7: "I will strike the Shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered." — the vision of a shepherd "who by God's will patiently suffers death and in so doing initiates the final turn of events". And the prophecy goes on to speak of this event: "On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the House of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness."¹ John writes of the Water and Blood that flow from Jesus' wounded side; Jesus Himself, the one pierced on the Cross, is the fountain of purification and healing for the whole world. The image of the Lamb, which in a different way plays a decisive role in the Book of Revelation, thus encompasses the entire Gospel. It also points to the deepest meaning of the "shepherd discourse" whose centre is precisely Jesus' act of laying down His life. Jesus becomes the door through which we must enter the sheepfold: "Truly, truly I say to you I am the door of the sheep." It is ultimately Jesus who is the shepherd — the flock "belongs" to Him alone!

Finally when Peter is entrusted with Jesus' own office of Shepherd, the Lord three times asks him, "Do you love me;" and with Peter's three responses he himself enters through Jesus the door; and three times Jesus tells Him, "Feed my lambs — feed my sheep." Peter is very clearly being appointed as the Shepherd of Jesus' sheep, and established in Jesus' Office as Shepherd. And as the Lord declares to Peter after conferring on him the Office of Shepherd, this includes accepting the Cross, being prepared to give his life. This is what it means in practice when Jesus says: "I am the door." This is how Jesus Himself remains the Shepherd.

There is so much more to be considered that is of great importance and we will continue next Sunday the same topic. In all these deep mysteries of Sacred Scripture we need the help of heaven: what better than to turn to our heavenly Mother who pondered all these things keeping them in her heart; but that Immaculate Heart is now our greatest help after the Holy Ghost. Pray the Mysteries of Mary's Rosary with great devotion; she will show us how Jesus is the way, the truth and the life.

¹ Zech: 12.10; 11; 13.1