

4th Sunday of Easter A - St. William of York

Introduction

I am delighted to be with you this afternoon. For one thing, I've served in three dioceses but only the Archdiocese of Baltimore has a parish named for my patron saint, St. William of York! I had hoped to take part in the 100th anniversary on Pentecost Sunday; unfortunately a sudden change of schedule beyond my control made that impossible. So I wanted to come this evening at least to pay an initial visit to offer you my personal congratulations and to express my closeness in prayer.

And what a joy to visit with you on this Fourth Sunday of Easter which is known as Good Shepherd Sunday - for on this Sunday the Gospel is always about Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Over the years, St. William of York has been blessed by many good shepherds, beginning with Cardinal Gibbons who founded the parish, and Father Pasquale di Paola, the first pastor of this parish.

I am blessed to live at the Basilica Rectory with a former pastor, Msgr. Valenzano, (who celebrates today his 39th anniversary of priestly ordination); and present with us today is Father DeAscanis, now the diocesan director of vocations. And how blessed we are with the pastoral care currently provided by Father Ray Harris and Father Fappiano. This is a good day to remember in prayer all the priests who have served this parish after the mind and heart of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. It is also a day to pray earnestly for many vocations to the priesthood, priests who can serve in the parishes of this Archdiocese of Baltimore and work closely with the laity in fulfilling the Church's mission to spread the Gospel.

The Mission of Evangelization

In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we saw how Peter and the other Apostles boldly announced the Gospel. Their proclamation was powerful - those who heard it were cut to the heart. They repented of their sins and were baptized and from that day forward began to live an entirely new kind of life.

Left to their own devices, Peter and the other Apostles would have been unable to

change hardened sinful hearts so readily. It was possible only because, in the power of the Holy Spirit, they themselves had truly heard the voice of the Shepherd and had left everything to follow in his footsteps. This good Shepherd also called them to share in his priesthood, which he handed on at the Last Supper and fulfilled as he laid down his life on the Cross for us and for our salvation.

This priesthood of Jesus is beautifully described in our second reading from I Peter: "He himself bore our sins in his body upon the cross, so that, free from sin, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you had gone astray like sheep, but you have now returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls."

The Gate and the Shepherd

This brings us to the Gospel where Jesus describes himself as both shepherd & gate. This means that Jesus, true God and true man, is the only Redeemer, 'the only name in heaven or on earth by which we can be saved' (AA 4:4). Everyone else who comes pretending to offer salvation or some other form of lasting human happiness is 'a thief and a marauder.' There are many substitutes for the love of God that Christ alone offers. How many people and things promise us happiness but never deliver. How easily we are deceived by sin which never bring us happiness but instead leaves us empty and miserable. Jesus knows how prone we are to fall, to wander, to grow hungry and thirsty. He loves us anyway and goes in search of us, each of us individually.

In the Gospel Jesus tells us he is both the gate and the Shepherd. He is the door, the gate, through which we enter into eternal life, for Jesus is "the way, the truth, and the life." 'No one comes to the Father except through him.' And the gate by which Jesus opens the way to eternal life is his sacred humanity. Thus I now repeat the words of St. Peter: "He bore our sins in his body upon the Cross." Similarly the author of the Letter to the Hebrews tells us "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire but a body you have prepared for me." Whenever we look upon a Cross or contemplate the five wounds of Jesus, let us give thanks that he assumed our humanity, including our flesh, by which he could die for our sins and rise from the dead, thus spelling the defeat of sin and death.

Yet, Jesus is not only the gate but also the Shepherd. Do we really believe that Jesus

is the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls? Do we really believe that he knows us, loves us, and cares about our problems? Do we trust the Lord and his loving Providence to lead us through the valley of death, whatever that might be for each of us, 'from faith to vision and from belief to contemplation' - to the green and verdant pastures of eternity where we shall graze not on grass but on the vision of God's glory? In the Gospel, Jesus tells us that the sheep recognize his voice and follow him. So this evening, we must stop and ask ourselves: Do we listen? Do we pray? Do we allow his heart to speak to ours? Or do we allow the world, the flesh, and the devil to drown out his voice?

The Mission of Evangelization

This brings us back full circle. How we admire the courage and effective of the Apostles in announcing the Gospel. How we love to read about the exploits of the first Christians who began the work of spreading the name of Jesus in every town and village. But it's not enough for us to be edified and inspired. We must go and do the same.

If we would courageously and effectively bear witness to the Gospel, then we too must encounter the Good Shepherd, we must listen to his voice when the Scriptures are proclaimed and we must welcome the Good Shepherd into the depths of our hearts most especially when we receive him in Holy Communion, Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity. When we decide to lay aside our sins and repent often by making a good confession, then we become equipped not just to tell people about Jesus but to bear witness to the critical difference which Jesus has made in our lives. People will see us bearing witness to the joy of the Gospel.

The more parishioners who become witnesses to the joy of the Gospel, the more vibrant a parish will be, the more others will be attracted to it, some returning after a long absence, some in search of truth and love. Thus each of us, in accordance with our God-given vocation, is called to participate in the mission of Jesus the Good Shepherd and guardian of our souls. It is my prayer that God will raise up many holy shepherds from this parish and make all of you into his true disciples and friends as you seek to live the Gospel and transmit it others.

May God bless you and keep you always in His love!