

4th Sunday Easter (C)

8th May 2022

‘Vocations Sunday: Shepherd & shepherds’

Acts 13: *all were destined for eternal life became believers* Ps 99: *we are His people, the sheep of His flock* Apoc 7: *the Lamb who is at the throne will be their shepherd* Jn 10: 27–30: *the sheep that belong to me listen to my voice.*

Each Fourth Sunday of Easter we hear a part of the famous ch. 10 of St John’s Gospel, the chapter on the Good Shepherd — hence the alternative name for this Sunday, ‘Good Shepherd Sunday.’ This year (‘Year C’) we hear only a few verses, but they are powerful ones, from which we can draw much benefit. *The sheep that belong to Me listen to My voice: I know them and they follow Me.* These are really powerful words that Jesus speaks to us this morning/evening, aren’t they? When we stop and think deeply about it, it means: Almighty God is willing to be a *Shepherd*: not just a powerful and distant God, keeping aloof and mysterious, but coming amongst us into the dirt and grime of daily life, to be a *Shepherd*; to actually guide us, lead us, feed us, speak to us, call us, so that we will not get lost, but may keep to His Way, the way to eternal life.

We celebrate today our Lord who refers to Himself as the ‘Good Shepherd’ — He knows His sheep and leads them; He calls each one by name. He calls each one of *us*

by name. As the baptized, we are not in any way ‘anonymous Christians’ — we are named and called. If you look back on your life — are there not good things which have come your way; things to give thanks for, things which have only come your way thanks to the goodness of God? Has He not in fact given you guidance across the years, as you look back and reflect? ... in small and quiet ways? ... ways you never perhaps recognised at the time, but now you see how all along He was shepherding you, calling you, in the right paths?

For this reason we often call this Sunday also, ‘Vocations Sunday,’ which we can interpret in a broad sense, as pertaining to each of us, as well as a narrower sense in terms of specific religious vocations. Pope Francis, in his message for this Vocations Sundays emphasizes this wider sense of ‘Vocations Sunday’:

God addresses a particular call to each of us. He touches our lives by His love and directs them to our ultimate goal, to a fulfilment that transcends the very threshold of death. That is how God wanted to see our lives and how He sees them still.

Michelangelo Buonarroti is said to have maintained that every block of stone contains a statue within it, and it is up to the sculptor to uncover it. If that is true of an artist, how much more is it true of God! — In the young woman of Nazareth He saw the Mother of God. In Simon the fisherman he saw Peter, the rock on which He would build his Church. In the publican Levi He recognized the apostle and evangelist Matthew, and in Saul, a harsh persecutor of Christians, He saw Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles. God's loving gaze always meets us, touches us, sets us free and transforms us, making us into new persons.

That is what happens in every vocation: we are met by the gaze of God, who calls us. Vocation, like holiness, is not an extraordinary experience reserved for a few. Just as there is a "holiness of the saints next door," so too there is a vocation for everyone, for God's gaze and call is directed to every person.

But in this Easter season we also remember that the risen Jesus called His disciples to share specifically in the work of shepherding His people. In last Sunday's Gospel he

repeatedly urged Peter, "Feed my lambs ... Look after my sheep ... Feed my sheep." As He appeared to His apostles and prepared them for His ascension, He gave to them this task of sharing in His work of service. "Feed my sheep," He told them: lead the Christian people in the right paths, teach them all I have taught you, feed their minds with everything that is true, and feed their souls with the Bread of eternal life, which is Myself. As I am the Good Shepherd, says Jesus, be good shepherds yourselves. Huge tracts of the *Acts of the Apostles*, too, of course (which we read throughout Eastertide as the 1st Reading) speak of the ministry of the apostles, and then of others very soon sharing in that sacred calling: Paul & Barnabas, Timothy & Titus, Mark & Luke; and in allied ways, Dorcas & Lydia, Priscilla & Aquila.

God is always calling people to share in His Son's role as Shepherd, to lay down their lives for His sheep. God does not stop calling young men and women to serve Him and His Church with their whole lives. He does not stop calling, quietly, gently. If there is a vocations crisis in

this particular part of the world, it is not because God abandons His Church here, or has gone quiet on us. It is more likely that we are not listening well enough, that we give ourselves too little to stillness and prayer; too little to nurturing a deep and lively faith, a faith which sees a great joy in giving one's whole life over to the serving the Lord.

Priesthood and religious sisters/brothers are not an optional extra for the Church — the Church can't do without them! Christ doesn't want His Church ever to be without them. To have the life of prayer and worship strongly alive — to have the sacraments, and especially the Mass — needs ordained ministers, and men/women consecrated to the Lord. If our Christian marriages and families — our Catholic communities — are strong in faith and active in love, there *will be* vocations: the call of God will be heard, and the young will have the courage and encouragement to respond.

If one day you feel called to the priesthood or religious life, now or some time (perhaps unexpectedly!) in the future, how will you react? Will you have the courage

to pray, “Lord Jesus, if this is Your will, help me follow Your call”? Or will you dismiss it, putting it out of mind as some crazy speculation? Or if one day your *son* were to tell you “I think I want to be a priest,” what would you say? If your daughter were to say, “I believe I want to enter religious life,” how would you react? Will you help them discern your/their vocation? Will you rejoice in the chance to co-operate with God in their life, or will you dismiss it all as some fanciful idea of youth that doesn't tie in with your own plans for them? If so, you could find yourself deliberately de-railing God's own plans! It is a certainty that we can only find a real peace in pursuing the vocation that God calls us to, and none other.

My first ideas of entering the priesthood came at around the age of 10 — that's not to say that when I entered seminary at 27, or when I was ordained at 33, I still had a 10-year-old's view of the priestly life. Luckily my parents encouraged me, neither forcing my decision, nor trying to deflect me into some other path of their own choosing. Vocations must neither be forced nor

discouraged! Either is contrary to the idea that God Himself does the calling. We mustn't force, but nor must we ever discourage; we must nurture in ourselves, and in every person whatever God's calling for them may be. We can't be truly happy unless we're doing what God Himself has planned for us.

So, on this Vocations Sunday, we should each be asking ourselves: are we listening carefully for those gentle hints that God gives us, as to what our calling is? One of the great tasks of a university chaplaincy is to provide a safe and prayerful setting for that discernment. One of the great tasks for your university years — here, and with all the benefits of your chaplaincy, your chaplains, your student peers, and your friends from Newman House — is to pray for and about your vocation. Every one of us who assists here at Newman House, and in the colleges as chaplains, is always ready to help you discuss and discern your vocation. An active, happy, and praying Chaplaincy will always be a place to nourish and foster vocations. For some of you, that may already have become clear — there

are engagements & weddings in the offing; there are consultations with vocations directors, and time being spent as experience with religious orders — but for others of you it may be all rather perplexing, still. Perhaps today, then, Good Shepherd Sunday, is a day to be reminded that “the Lord is my Shepherd” ... that He does lead me and guide me, and wants the very best for my life, in Him. So, trust Him and pray to Him that He be your infallible Shepherd. Here's a prayer that I've had with me in my prayer book since I was just a teenager, a prayer we used to say often as a family at our night prayers ...

Lord, make me a better person.

More considerate towards others, more honest with myself, more faithful to You.

Make me generous enough to want sincerely to do Your will whatever it may be.

Help me to find my true vocation in life, and grant that through it I may find happiness myself, and bring happiness to others.

Grant, Lord, that those whom You call to enter the priesthood or the religious life may have the generosity to answer Your call, so that those who need Your help may always find it.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.