

4th Sunday of Easter (B)

21st April 2024

'I lay down My life for My sheep'

Acts 4: "*Jesus Christ the Nazarene, ... you crucified, ... God raised from the dead*"

Ps 117: *The stone which the builders rejected has become the corner-stone.*

1Jn 3: *when it is revealed we shall be like Him, ... we shall see Him as He really is.*

Jn 10: 11–18: "*I am the Good Shepherd; I know My own and My own know me.*"

It's St George's Day on Tuesday — feast of the martyred soldier and patron saint of England — but for me the strongest memory I have of 23rd April in my life is from the year that I was 10: it was a big day, a wrench in some ways, but also exciting; it was the one time we moved house as a family: we moved from Kent to Hertfordshire. Not such a long move, compared to the moves and journeys that some of you have had in your life, but it was big for me. I also remember that it snowed that day!

But that juncture, that move from Kent, also allows me to date the time from when I felt I wanted to be a priest. In an essay written prior to our move, in my Kent County Council Primary School exercise book, I expressed some desires: firstly, to go to university; and secondly, to be a priest; (thirdly, it's true, to go on the African missions!). What explanation can one give for that expression of priestly calling, at so young an age? [To be honest, it's

almost just as much of a surprise that at 10 I'd hoped to go to *university*, which was a complete unknown to our family.] As a priest one is often asked, by Catholics and non-Catholics alike, "what made you want to become a priest?" It's not always an easy question to answer; though every priest will have his own response. Ultimately, whether one feels called to priesthood at 10, or 5 or 50, it's a work of *God*, not one's own, and is therefore somewhat inscrutable. If it's a true calling, it's an inspiration of the Holy Spirit and can come in the most dramatic, or in the gentlest, of ways.

Each year I love this 4th Sunday of Eastertide, 'Good Shepherd Sunday,' when we have some portion of ch. 10 of St John, inviting us to hear Jesus's lovely self-description as 'the Good Shepherd.' It's a beautiful image, and for me one of the loveliest depictions of 'the Good Shepherd' is when He is shown with a lamb around His shoulders, safely taking the stray back to the flock, or assisting the weak one which has fallen. This sums up the care and personal attention that Our Blessed Lord takes

over each one of us, when we let Him. “*I know My own, and My own know Me,*” He says. Though Jesus is the Son of God, infinite in power and glorious in majesty, Lord of all, yet He does have an *individual concern for each one of us*. This is a powerful statement of His love for us, and should inspire our love also for Him. As we gaze on Him, this tender and loving shepherd of the flock of the Church, we are moved to follow Him and stay close to Him, for in His care we find our truest safety and peace.

We also are called to be ‘good shepherds.’ We keep this Sunday annually as ‘*Vocations Sunday,*’ praying for those whom God calls to Priesthood and Religious Life. But there is a wider sense in which we can all be imitators of Christ the Good Shepherd. The charitable way in which Our Lord God treats all mankind as worthy of love and care demands of us that we do the same to one another. We need to accompany the weak and the fallen, and gently bring back the stray. We cannot adopt a harsh and uncaring attitude to our neighbour, when the very Lord and Creator models Himself to us as a ‘Good Shepherd.’ We

also need to show tenderness and care at all times, and to all people, ... though we all know exercising such patience and tolerance can be a challenge at times. But relying on our closeness to the risen Jesus in the Church will always help us to mirror this Christian charity to others.

The narrower sense in which ‘Good Shepherd’ Sunday is kept as ‘Vocations Sunday’ is as a day of prayer for all those called to be shepherds of the flock of Christ’s Church; a day to pray for those giving their lives to Christ in a radical way as priests, and religious sisters and brothers. It is also a day to pray for *more* vocations, for those young people that God is calling to *hear* the call, and not have it drowned out by the distractions and noise of secular society.

I was in one of our national seminaries yesterday — St Mary’s, Oscott, just outside Birmingham — and from time to time I have reason to go to Allen Hall here in Chelsea (we’ve been blessed to have Gary Carter from Allen Hall helping out this year especially on Mondays with UCL CathSoc). I also get occasional chances to go

back to Rome to my own seminary where Fr Stephen, my predecessor here at Newman House, is now Rector. These seminaries are houses of great spirit, and hard work too! The 7–8yrs that seminarians spend in formation are very full years — happy years, as I experienced them — but full and busy. They deserve our prayers and wholehearted support as they give up their lives for the flock. They are, rather as Jesus puts it, “*laying down their life for the sheep,*” not quite in the sense of martyrdom, but by giving up their life, ambitions, careers, families of their own. The sacrifices they willingly make are for the good of us, the Church, to give their lives for the people of the Church, to commit their life’s work to the will of Christ. These men should be loved and supported by us for the ways in which they have offered themselves to the service of the Gospel. They will be the priests who will serve our people, our parishes and chaplaincies, in the decades to come, and we need their courageous act of service. They have heard the beautiful call of the Good Shepherd to follow Him in a very special way, but they don’t exist in a vacuum.

Vocations to the Priesthood and Religious Life come out of *families, parishes and communities that are already living out a committed Christian life* in imitation of the Good Shepherd. So, if we want to fill the seminary more, to offer to Christ the service of good, holy, young men to be His priests, then we need to sow those seeds in our own families and communities. As a University Chaplaincy we dearly love to support the calling of young men to the priesthood; to assist young women to try their vocation in religious life. This should be a constant part of our prayer, but it will only happen if we are diligent about protecting the faith of young Catholics, explaining the faith, supporting you all in prayer and the sacraments: passing on the faith as the highest priority of life.

Every vocation — be it marriage, priesthood, religious life, or the single life lived out in generous Christian service — has its own great demands of charity. But Jesus expresses this in a particular way as He says what it means to be “the Good Shepherd”: 5 times He says, let’s re-iterate, “*I lay down My life for My sheep.*” In a

special way, then, those called to Holy Orders are asked share in this, to “*lay down their lives for the sheep,*” for the flock of God’s Holy Church: to give themselves to the people of God day-in, day-out, for a lifetime. Yet, with God’s help *this is not a demand that is too great* (celibacy included); it is a burden that is happily borne (“*My yoke is easy and My burden light*”). For one can only find happiness and fulfilment in life if one is living the vocation which God has planned for one from eternity. And for some of us — some of *you* — that will rightly, and happily, be *the priesthood*. A life given to God; a life lived charitably in the service of others; a life spent hearing and following the call for which one was made, is a life that is blessed. May the tender ‘Good Shepherd,’ Jesus who so loves His flock and wants it to flourish, give us all the vocations that build up holy families, committed communities, a God-loving society. We dearly thank God for the men who are already giving their lives to be shepherds of the flock, and we commend their sanctity and happiness to the Great and Good Shepherd of the whole

beloved Flock, Jesus Christ.

Lord, send us holy priests, and bless us with the faith to promote Vocations amongst the young Catholics of our own acquaintance, and especially of our Chaplaincy.