

In our Gospel reading for Sunday, Jesus uses both the images of the sheep gate and the shepherd to describe Himself to the people. He says at the beginning of our reading: “Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever does not enter a sheepfold through the gate but climbs over elsewhere is a thief and a robber. But whoever enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens it for him, and the sheep hear his voice, as the shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.” Here Jesus refers to the practice where all the sheep of a village were put in a common fold, and then each shepherd would call his sheep by name and lead them out to pasture.

It is this image of a shepherd leading his flock out of the common fold and into the pasture that speaks to me. I see a connection between the shepherd entering the sheepfold to lead his sheep out to pasture, and the Son of God entering our human experience to lead us out of sin and death. The question is, are we willing to follow our Shepherd? He *does* know each of us by name. As we are reminded in our second reading from 1 Peter, Jesus “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.” But even though we know how much Jesus loves us, and what He has done for us, we are still tempted to not follow Him.

Sometimes we don’t want to be led out of where we are. We get a bit too comfortable, or we get scared. Sometimes we’re so wary of the unknown that we will not leave where we are even when we’re miserable. Or perhaps we don’t want to think of ourselves as sheep. After all, sheep seem to be easily led, and when we speak of others as “sheep,” it is usually a reference to them as people who will believe and follow anything, without thinking. But, as damaging as it may be to our egos, the image of sheep can be useful to us. While we are not called to follow Jesus as mindless automatons, we are called to trust Him more than ourselves. There is nothing we can do for ourselves that can match what Jesus has done for us. We don’t even know ourselves as well as He knows us.

When we follow ourselves rather than following Jesus, we may try to convince ourselves that we *are* following Him. We try to tell ourselves that satisfying any selfish desire actually pleases Jesus. After all, Jesus says to the people, “I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.” Isn’t abundant life having everything we want? I don’t think that is what the Gospel tells us. In our first reading from Acts, when the crowds ask Peter what they need to do, he tells them, “Repent and be baptized...in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is made to you and to your children and to all those far off, whomever the Lord our God will call.” Abundant life is living in the Spirit, not in self-absorption!

So, are we willing to follow our Shepherd? Are we willing to be His? Are we willing to take the risk, and have Him lead us out of worldly wisdom into Gospel living? Are we willing to trust that He can bring us to abundant life? We have a choice, but if we remember the choice Jesus made for us, we know what our answer is to be. Our Shepherd is calling. May we follow Him.

May God continue to bless us all, and may we put our trust in the Good Shepherd.

In the Crucified and Risen Christ,

Fr. Phil, CP