

Easter 4.

1. It is more than obvious, is it not, why today is called Good Shepherd Sunday. The Gospel from John has two different parables joined together. In the first parable Jesus compares himself to a shepherd who knows his sheep and calls each of them by his own name. The sheep in turn know him and will follow him in and out of the sheepfold, but they will not follow a stranger. In the second parable Jesus compares himself to the gate of the sheepfold. We are told that a shepherd guarded his sheep at night by making his bed at the gate of the sheepfold. So those who wanted to steal or harm the sheep were not able to enter through the gate--unless of course they killed the shepherd. If they were unwilling to do that, they had to sneak in over a side wall or fence. So Jesus compares himself to the gate which offered the sheep protection by night and allowed them to go in and out during the day. Thus the parables speak to us of Jesus as one who protects us day and night, even at the risk of losing his own life, and who knows us by name. In describing himself in this way Jesus is of course building upon his Jewish heritage which described God in the same terms. For us perhaps the most familiar Old Testament description of God as a shepherd is Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want."

2. Do we take this understanding of God and of Jesus to heart? Do we follow our shepherd when he calls us? Do we trust that He will protect us? Can we look back at our lives and see where we were shepherded? Let us do that! Let us look back at our lives and give thanks to our shepherd for the many times when he led us out of difficult circumstances of our lives, protecting us and bringing us again and again to safety, sometimes almost against our own will. Let us also make an act of faith that he will continue to do this for us today and tomorrow, just as he has in the past. This is to live out of faith and in faith. "I know whom I have trusted," Paul once wrote, referring to Jesus. Paul had entrusted his life to Christ. As believers, we must do the same, even in the little, ordinary things of daily life.

3. Having been shepherded, we are called to be shepherds for others. We are called to care for and protect others. Do we do that? The first application is of course to our family and friends, then to our church, and then to the larger society. When we look at the larger society today, where and how does it need shepherding? How can we care for and protect it? What problems need our attention, our care? Here differences will appear among us even though we are all united in the same faith, even though we are all

members of the same Church. We will differ on which problems need our immediate care, and we will also differ on how we can and should care for them.

4. One problem which is now very close to us is that of illegal immigration. Here there will undoubtedly be divisions among us. Some of us will say that illegal immigrants are law breakers and therefore must suffer the consequences of their crime either by being deported or put in prison. A country cannot be completely porous. It must have territorial boundaries, and it must be able to protect them. Others will say that protecting people is more important than protecting boundaries. But others will answer this argument by saying that a country must protect its own citizens first, and if illegal immigrants are taking away jobs from American citizens and causing an increase in our taxes because of their use of public schools and hospitals, the country must act to remove them.

5. Our legislators are now proposing that all employers verify electronically that their employees are legal. The governor of our state wishes the same system to be used for state agencies. Thus police are supposed to verify the legality of the people they deal with. But others say that this system is seriously flawed and could result in many erroneous classifications. For example, legal foreign

worker are 30 times more likely to be erroneously rejected by the E-verify system than U.S. born citizens. Such measures will also drive illegals underground and leave them at the mercy of the most unscrupulous people in society who will then exploit them for all their worth, because they will know that their victims will not be able to go to the police. Instead they will be forced to retreat more and more into an underground world where greed and cruelty prevail. No one with our understanding of God and Jesus as the Good Shepherd can simply ignore that fact.

6. This is a difficult problem. But let us reason as well as we can, and let us reason and act out of motives of care and protection of the foreigner rather than out of fear and even hatred for them. After all, the foreigner, the stranger, is one of the three classes of people (the others are widows and orphans) whom we as Christians and as inheritors of the Jewish traditions are supposed to care most about. These are our brothers and sisters as human beings. And many of them are also our fellow Catholics. Let us approach them as we hope they approach us, as those who trust in Jesus as the Good Shepherd and who therefore attempt to shepherd each other.