

The imagery of the shepherd, the sheep and the sheepfold echoes a favorite theme used by the Old Testament prophets: the Chosen People are the flock and the Lord is the shepherd. That is eloquently expressed in the 23rd Psalm. *“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul”*.^{NRSV} And again in Psalm 95: *“For he is our God and we are his people, the flock he shepherds”*.^{NAB}

The prophet Ezekiel used the analogy of the shepherds to describe the leaders of Judah, the priests and kings, at the time of the exile. Unfortunately, they were not shepherding their flock, but were tending to their own needs and well being. As a result the entire nation of Israel was taken and scattered by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. In chapter 34, Ezekiel proclaims God's condemnation of these bad shepherds:

“Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves!

Should not shepherds feed the sheep?

You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool;...

but you do not feed the sheep.

You have not strengthened the weak,

you have not healed the sick,

you have not bound up the injured,

you have not brought back the strayed,

you have not sought the lost,...

So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd;

and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. ...

My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth,

with no one to search or seek for them.”^{Ezekiel 34:2a-6 NRSV}

Ezekiel follows this indictment with a prophesy that God will seek out the lost and bring them back, that he will bind up the injured and heal the sick, and he will raise up one Shepherd, a man like David, who will pasture his sheep and keep them safe.

In the 10th chapter of the Gospel of John, which we read today, Jesus presents himself as this Good Shepherd who looks after his sheep, fulfilling Ezekiel's prophecy. He does this by also using the analogy of shepherds and flocks.

Shepherds and sheepfolds were a common sight in Palestine, so the analogy that Jesus presents would have been full of meaning to the 1st century Jews. A sheepfold is an enclosure with a low rock wall that sheep cannot climb over. In those times it was the practice to bring a number of flocks to the same sheepfold, where they would be guarded for the night by a lookout. Then at dawn, each shepherd would come back, the lookout would open the gate, and the shepherd would call his sheep by name, and they would come out of the pen and follow him. He would continue letting them hear his voice, to prevent his sheep from straying as he would lead them to pasture.

There is an implication in this analogy that the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders, to whom Jesus had been speaking, were the thieves and robbers who were leading God's flock astray. Jesus was alluding to Ezekiel's description of Israel's false shepherds. But when they did not understand, Jesus presents a second analogy which is more blunt. *“I am the gate. All who came before me are thieves and robbers.”* Jesus makes it clear that he is the true gateway to salvation, he is the shepherd that the flock should follow, it is he who will lead them – to the good pastures. The Pharisees are the thief that comes to *“steal and slaughter and destroy”*. Those sheep that truly belong to Jesus will hear and recognize his voice and follow him.

There are two messages for us here. Jesus' words have a special relevance for those who hold the office of pastors in the Church. To be *good shepherds* they must be one with Christ. They must take seriously the responsibility for the people entrusted to them. They must strengthen the weak, heal the sick and bind up the injured. They are to seek out the lost, bring back the stray, and protect the flock from those who would lead them astray. They must guide the flock *in right paths* even when they *walk in the dark valley*. This is the role of a good shepherd. This is the role of our pastors.

The second message is to the flock. There are enemy voices in the air in the midst of which we must be able to recognize the voice of Christ. That raises a couple of questions. How do we recognize the voice of Christ? And if Jesus is the shepherd of the flock where is the sheepfold in which we find safety?

We find the answers in Jesus' words to Peter when he said, "*upon this rock I will build my church*". And later in the threefold admonition to "*Feed my sheep*". Christ established the Church to become our sheepfold. Jesus is the gate through which we come into that fold. From there he will keep our souls safe and lead us to good pasture.

In our second reading today Peter underscores this idea when he calls Jesus "*the shepherd and guardian of our souls*". But we still need to learn to recognize his voice if we are to follow him when he calls our name. That recognition is necessary if we are to avoid following the thief that comes to steal us away.

It is from within the sheepfold that we first hear our Shepherd's voice. When Jesus speaks to us through his Church, he speaks in three ways. We hear him first through Holy Scripture, the Scriptures that the Church collected and preserved over the centuries. We hear him also through the Sacred Traditions, those things not written in Scripture but passed on to us from the beginnings of his Church. And finally through the teaching authority of the Church, which Jesus promised to preserve from error until the end of time. The Church today provides us with a living voice to guide us on our journey.

Any time we think we are hearing Jesus' voice we must test what we hear and assess whether it is consistent with his voice spoken through the Church. Of course that means we need to actually read Scripture, become familiar with the Traditions of the Church and pay attention to the official teachings of the Church. Faith formation is a necessary prerequisite to condition ourselves to be able to recognize the voice of our Shepherd.

There are practical ways of forming our faith that will enable us to recognize the voice of Jesus. Reading Scripture regularly is of primary importance. St. Jerome is often quoted as saying, "*Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ*". But we as Catholics also have a privileged place to encounter Scripture, and that is here at the Mass. When we listen to the readings proclaimed at Mass we hear Scripture, we hear the voice of Jesus.

Reading the Church Fathers or the lives of the saints, especially those with whom we identify, is also a way to develop an ear for our Lord's voice. Through them we encounter the traditions of the Church and the wisdom of those who traveled this road before us.

But sometimes we can encounter different interpretations or opinions on the things we read or study. As Catholics we have a living voice to which we can listen to resolve such differences. That living voice is the voice of the Church found in the pope and the bishops. When we hear the living voice of the Church we hear the voice of Jesus.

We can also hear the voice of Jesus in our own conscience, if it is well formed. The niggling voice in our head that reminds us when we are about to do something wrong or urges us toward what is right, that too is the voice of Jesus. And, of course, we can hear Jesus' voice in prayer.

But we must also be aware of the voice of the stranger that comes to steal, kill and destroy. Those voices are all around us today, particularly in our secular society. The voices of peer pressure and self deprecation; the voices of pride, lust, and self indulgence, the voices of selfishness, self-centeredness and greed, the voices of judgmentalism, hatred and intolerance. Those voices attempt to entice us away from our Shepherd, not for our benefit, but for their own. Learning to recognize the voice of the Shepherd over the voice of the thief is vital to our survival as Christians.

Through Ezekiel, God describes the true Good Shepherd, the one who calls us each by name, the one we strive to recognize, the one we trust to follow.

“I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.

As shepherds seek out their flocks

when they are among their scattered sheep,

so I will seek out my sheep.

I will rescue them from all the places

to which they have been scattered” Ezekiel 34:11-12a NRSV

Like the shepherd who has one hundred sheep and loses one, leaves the ninety-nine to go after the lost one, Jesus forgets no one. For he himself said: *“this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.”* John 6:39 NIV