

## 2020 4<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER

Today's Gospel provides us with one of the loveliest images of Jesus, as the Good Shepherd.

In my Breviary I have one of the holy cards given to all those who attended the Ordination of our own Bishop, Bishop Steve, as Bishop, on 13 February 2015. The picture on the card shows Jesus seated on a rock surrounded by six sheep. With His right hand, Jesus is playfully scratching one of the sheep under its chin. All of the sheep are looking at Jesus attentively. Clearly Jesus is speaking to them, they know His voice and are listening attentively to Him. Jesus is holding in his left hand a long, thin shepherd's staff shaped in the form of a cross.

The picture is so evocative of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Jesus knows each of His sheep by name. He loves each one of them and is willing to die on the Cross for them.

On the back of the card is printed the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want..." Jesus is my shepherd; He is your shepherd.

I remember well that in his first homily, Bishop Steve spoke of his desire to be a good shepherd to all of us; a promise he is wonderfully fulfilling.

Part of the self-understanding within our church is the way we understand the role of our Bishops. First and foremost, they are shepherds. Being a good shepherd is of the essence of being a good bishop.

What is a Good Shepherd? Pope Francis answers this brilliantly.

Pope Francis constantly exhorts all bishops (and priests) to live with the 'smell' of the sheep on them. Good Shepherds live among their sheep; not apart from them. Because they sometimes have to carry hurt sheep on their shoulders, a good shepherd will carry the smell of the sheep in his clothes, his hair, on his skin.

In the words of Pope Francis: "Put your own skin and your own heart on the line. Do not grow weary of people's requests and needs no matter how inconvenient or banal such appeals may seem. Look at what's driving the encounter- the need for divine comfort."

Pope Francis said that 'a sterile bishop or priest is one whose heart is not moved by the needs of his sheep'. All bishops and priests must be men of compassion and mercy- reaching out in love to the many sheep he is responsible for who are wounded by spiritual, material or emotional problems.

Pope Francis also said to his bishops and priests: “When a person is injured, first tend to their open wounds. Give priority to bringing God’s healing and comfort to those who are hurt - analysis can come later. What matters is unction not function.”

Sadly, though, there is a temptation among some faithful Catholics to avoid approaching their bishop or priests with serious concerns. They see their shepherds as being overly burdened and do not want to burden them any further. They thereby isolate their bishop and priests and distance them from the real concerns of their lives.

This is a form of inverted clericalism. Clericalism is not just a bishop or priest sheltering himself from the smell of his sheep. It is also the sheep avoiding the shepherd by not wanting to share their smell with him.

Pope Francis constantly refers to the Church as a ‘field hospital’ - a place where injuries are treated- especially in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Bishops and priests have been told by our Pope to have a special depth of mercy in the administering of this Sacrament- in welcoming, listening, advising and absolving.

In Bishop Steve’s card, the Good Shepherd is lovingly scratching one of the sheep under its chin. While this would not be good pastoral practice in the Confessional, we get the message! The Sacrament of Reconciliation is about bringing comfort and showing tender love.

In the Gospel Jesus also refers to Himself as the Gatekeeper of the Sheepfold. In Our Lord’s time all the sheep of a Village would be herded into one common enclosure at night-time. There was only one way out of the enclosure- through the Gate. A gatekeeper would guard the gate during the dark hours of night. And then in the morning the shepherds, refreshed after a good night’s sleep, would enter through the gate- firstly being checked out as being true shepherds by the gatekeeper. The shepherds would then call out for their sheep. A shepherd’s sheep would recognise the voice of their shepherd and come to his call.

In our Church I see the Pope as the Gatekeeper. All of the Bishops must be given the nod by him before taking leadership of their flocks. Pope Francis, therefore, is the Head Shepherd in the Church- the Vicar of the Good Shepherd.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday- a day when we especially pray for our shepherds- the Pope, our bishop and our priests. Pope Francis continually exhorts all in the church to give to our shepherds our friendship, our affection and our trust; but most of all, the support of our prayers.

