

SHEPHERD SUNDAY

Traditionally, today which is the 4th Sunday after Easter is regarded as 'Shepherd Sunday'. This is likely to have been drawn from St. John's gospel chapter 10, which speaks about Jesus as the good Shepherd. It is also from that chapter that we have the gospel reading of today.

Today's celebration invites us to recall and celebrate people who have shepherded us by touching our lives positively, in such a transformative way either through direct contact or from reading about them or hearing their stories. Such transformation would not have been possible if we were not open to embrace their wise instructions and examples, and as such leading us to being better Christians, great models of good leadership, and disciples of Jesus, our Chief Shepherd. We have many of such people around us still while others are long gone to be with their creator. Among them are teachers, fellow workers, parents, grandparents, community leaders, uncles or aunts, older brothers or sisters, priests, and so on. These people led us in some ways to be in relationship with Jesus from whom all good leaders draw their daily strength, wisdom and guidance, in order to be Jesus for others.

The first reading today speaks to us of another good leader after the heart of Jesus, our good shepherd. He is Peter, the apostle of Jesus Christ. Peter spoke so well to the hearts of his Jewish audience that they became troubled in spirit, a reaction that was prompted by grace, leading to repentance. That sermon preached by Peter is the concluding part of a sermon he preached to the Jews immediately after receiving the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Day. In his sermon Peter reminded them the enormity of their crime in persuading Pilate to have Jesus executed. Peter then announced to them the resurrection and leads them to see God's plan for which our good shepherd, Jesus is a full representation of that plan for the world. Peter is inviting us too to take our place behind that crowd, because his words apply to us as well, in the sense that each and every one of us took part in the death of Jesus. We did that through our sins and we all know that sin continues to play havoc in our daily lives.

Interestingly, the people's reaction to Peter's speech is worthy of note, and as well as Peter's response to their reactions. They asked Peter, "What shall we do?" Peter instructed them what their response to their own reactions would look like.

Meaning they were to repent of their sins, and leave behind their former ways of life that are offensive to God, and embrace the new life that Jesus is offering through baptism for the forgiveness of their sins.

They were also to go on leaving this new life of love and submission to the Holy Spirit lead. It is a life in which Jesus Christ becomes their personal lord and savior on daily basis.

The early Christians chose the title 'Lord' for Jesus Christ as a way of confessing his absolute dominion over angels, human beings and things created. In ascribing the title to Jesus, those Christians meant to stress what faith in the Risen Christ should imply. In fact, it implies a complete surrender to Jesus of all that we have and of all that we are on a daily basis and in all circumstances. This is what St. Paul meant in Phil 3:10, when he said, "All I want is to know Christ and to experience the power of his resurrection,

to share in his sufferings and become like him in his death". We know for sure that Jesus dominion over us is a dominion of love. This is truly liberating from all the conflicting inclinations of the human flesh, and its negativities and distractions, generated by the self, the material world we live in, and from sin and death. Our dominion over all of that in Christ, gives us freedom to live our lives to the full. After all, Jesus promised that he has come to lead us into the fullness of life, of abundant life. We might be wondering how possible that is in such crooked, miserable and broken world. With God all things are possible. Abundant life for Jesus means that God wants his children to live life, and live it to the full even in this present life. For God, mere existence is not enough for us because it leads to poverty of mind and heart and consequently to eternal death. We should live in such a way that we won't look back and regret that we have wasted our life. G.K. Chesterton talks about how sad it is when someone dies with all the music inside him or her that would have been shared and generated life. We could put it this way; how sad it is to die with all the life, all the love, and all the joy inside us wasted. It is said that life is generous to those who seize it with both hands. Those who live fully and intensely will not feel cheated at death. We have great saints who can testify to that by their own life. We have people like St. Teresa of Arvila, St. Rose of Lima, Blessed Pope John Paul 11, St. Philip Neri, St. Francis of Assisi, St Bakhita the slave girl. I encourage you to watch the movie of Bakhita the slave girl to see what I am talking about.

In the past, Christian religion tended to be identified with restrictions and prohibitions, and many of us were brought up on a theology of detachment from the world, that life was something to be survived rather than lived. However, Jesus encourages us to follow him and live fully here bellow and to look forward to life without end. To live fully is not the same as having opportunities to grab all the pleasures of life for oneself without a sense of decency, principles and solidarity with others. Jesus is saying rather that it is possible to enjoy life to the full while being at the same time devout and religious. In other words, it is not possible to have this abundant life if one is disconnected from God. So, let us go to our good Shepherd and learn from him how this strange but sweet phenomenon works.

Fr. Jude