

4th Sunday of Easter, Cycle C - April 17, 2016

Last night we celebrated with Archbishop Coakley the confirmation of 29 of our high school students. Part of their preparation toward the end was to come and interview with either Deacon Paul or me to share with us what they had learned in this two-year process of preparation. One of the questions that I would always have for them is: “Who is Jesus for you? Tell me about Jesus.” And, most of them would simply begin naming some facts about Him. You know, “He is the son of Mary. Joseph is his foster father. He worked miracles. He died for our sins.” But then I would ask them, “I want you to tell me who He is for you.” Because there is a difference between knowing things about Jesus as opposed to *knowing* Jesus. It is a difference that emerges from a vital life of prayer, a daily conversation with Him, a getting to know Him and allowing Him to reveal Himself to us. Really, it’s all about relationship. And, as it is with any solid, life-giving relationship in our life, any good friendship. It means spending time with the One you love. It means listening to them. It means taking the time to be attentive to them. This is how you get to know someone. And that’s why, for those students confirmed last night, for all of us, the gift of the Spirit is so vital.

This Season of the Spirit, the fifty days of the Easter Season, are given to us to remind us that the Holy Spirit is given to us in order that we might come to know Jesus. Not just know things about Him, but to know Him. And the gifts flowing from the Spirit, especially Wisdom, Understanding, and Knowledge, are meant to help us in that growing relationship with the Risen Lord. I remember one of those students when I was asking about those gifts mentioned desiring them so they could do better on their exams and I pointed out the gift of Wisdom, Knowledge, and Understanding is not about acing your Chemistry exam, it’s about gifts that enable us to know the Lord, to know Him, to be drawn deeper into a relationship with Him and that one of the most powerful ways we do that, of course, is by praying with Sacred Scripture, especially the Gospels — Coming to know the Living Lord through His word given to us in the Scriptures.

Today we come to know Him in a very special way as The Good Shepherd. Every year on the fourth Sunday of Easter is Good Shepherd Sunday. The Church gives us selections every year at this time from the tenth chapter of John’s Gospel. We are in Cycle C and the selection this year from that tenth chapter is very small, only four verses, but it speaks about how the Good Shepherd knows His sheep. He calls them and they follow Him. This Good Shepherd that we’ve come to know in a very powerful way is the one who leads us through the Valley of Death and to Eternal Life, and the one who even know leads us through any sort of Valley of Tears or trials into a new life.

The context of this Gospel reading from the tenth chapter of John today is a setting in the Temple where Jesus is just being interrogated by some of the Jews about whether He is the Messiah or not. They want to know, they want Him to tell them, that He is the Promised One. These interrogators in the Temple, they know lots of things about Jesus. They know He is from Nazareth. They know that He’s got a huge following, that He’s been teaching and healing and doing mighty deeds, but they do not *know* Him. They do not know Him. In fact, in the verse immediately preceding today’s Gospel, Jesus says to them, “You do not believe in me because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to me, they know my voice. You are not my sheep.”

It is interesting also on this Good Shepherd Sunday that we have another image that seems to be the opposite of the shepherd. If you listen closely to the Second Reading from the Book of Revelation, the Scripture writer tells us about this glorified Lamb of God sitting on the throne, and he says “The lamb will shepherd them.” Imagine that! The *lamb* will shepherd them and lead them to springs of life-giving water. The Good Shepherd in the Gospel and the lamb in the Second Reading, the very Lamb of God, He is one of us, one of the flock. In fact, He first becomes one of us, one of the sheep, in order that we might come to know Him as The Good Shepherd. In our tradition, the Church teaches that He is both lamb and shepherd, He is both priest and victim, He is both human and divine – human and divine. So this image of the lamb who shepherds us kind of takes us back to the Mystery of Christmas when the very Son of God became one like us in all things in order to listen to the human condition, to know our lives from the inside out, from birth all the way to death, all of our joys, all of our sorrows. The Son of God, the Good Shepherd, becomes the Lamb, like us, in order to know us that we might come to know Him.

So, we have reason for great joy, great joy, because we have a God who has pitched his tent among us, who has lived among us, who wants to be known, who longs to be known by us, a God who spends time with us in Jesus, His Son, the Good Shepherd, and who has listened carefully to what it means to be human. He calls you and me, therefore, the Good Shepherd today, to become more fully a part of His flock and to find in this communion we have with Him and with one another the power to overcome this rampant individualism that seems to penetrate every part of our society — to recognize that we do not find out who we are alone, but rather, we find out who we are together as members of the flock of the Good Shepherd. As we hear His voice and come to know Him, we come to know we are members of a family of God. We are brothers and sisters to one another. And as He continues to lead us, we have this desire growing in our heart as we know Him better to care about the things He cares about, to do what he wants us to do with our life. And, in following Him, to know what life is all about, what the gift of abundant life He shares with us is, and to know the call to everlasting joy.

Fr. Joseph Jacobi