

Fourth Sunday of Easter, A – May 3, 2020 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 8:30am Livestreamed Mass (COVID-19) – 800 words

Some of the earliest Christian artwork is found in the ancient Roman catacombs, and an image that was regularly found there was that of Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd. Since the beginning of Christianity, it has been a favorite image of who and what our Lord is for his faithful followers. And it is such a comforting image, as well: we see this from how practically everyone can quote from the twenty-third psalm, and how we especially like to hear that psalm in moments of sorrow, as at funerals. Ultimately, with this image we recognize that we cannot lead ourselves to the verdant pastures of heaven; we do not have what it takes. We need – and yes, we want – our Lord to guide us, as part of his flock.

Chapter ten of St. John’s gospel, one portion or another of which we always read on this Fourth Sunday of Easter, helps us to understand what makes our Shepherd good.¹ The sheep under his care do not have to worry about the path to take, for he leads them surely. They do not have to seek for food, because he brings them to the good pastures. And they need not fear any harm, for the shepherd defends them from all peril and from every enemy. To receive these benefits, one must simply learn the Shepherd’s voice and follow him. And who does not want the security that being under the Good Shepherd brings? Put this way, it is hard to imagine why this Shepherd does not have a much bigger flock!

But then again, maybe it is not so hard to understand. For do we, ourselves, really live in the security that the Good Shepherd offers? How often do we give in to worry or fear, or otherwise seek to blaze our own trail? We want the benefits, but we do not always want to follow trustingly. Our present situation is a fine example: if we are actively following the Good Shepherd, heeding his voice, and depending upon his providence, then what threat is a virus, really? Of course we do not want to contract it! But what if we did? If we are truly under the Shepherd’s watch, all will be OK. Yet, how difficult it is to trust. How we desire to take control – even where it is really not possible to do so!

But maybe the Lord has permitted this present trial to give us yet another chance to grow: I believe that is most certainly part of it. Will we take the medicine? Each day, as I log on to social media, I see so much spleen venting directed at various targets – especially government and Church leaders. Everyone has an opinion or three, and no opinion goes unexpressed. Seemingly everyone has an answer. Meanwhile, our Good Shepherd stands by – I think often shaking his head: “There they go again – if only they would rest in me. If only they would learn to trust me.” But given the choice between “letting go and letting God” or holding onto the reins, we often choose the latter. We fear really abandoning ourselves to him.

Now we come by this fear honestly. It is the story of our first parents. They let their trust in God die in their hearts, as the Catechism teaches;² they heeded their own designs, aided and abetted by one who was, in fact, their enemy. Are we left just to re-live their story over and over? Can we not somehow learn to trust God and lay down our fear? We can. We can be the good sheep who follow the Good Shepherd in peace and tranquility, come what may – who learn and internalize the fact that he really will defend us, provide for us, and lead us aright. It is possible to trust on this level. The saints prove it. They invite us again today to learn from them and to become saints ourselves.

¹ I am grateful to Fr. John Langlois, O.P. of the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, DC for the inspiration for a large part of this homily, from a reflection he emailed on this Sunday’s readings.

² See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 397.

Our task is to confront our fears and embrace our trials, not as some personal test of endurance, but within our intimate relationship with the Lord. We need to fall at his feet each day and plead with him to crucify our willfulness, our fear, our “need” to control. And as we plead, we must pray: “Jesus, I trust in you! Help me to trust you more!” He uses trials to purify us, and it is not easy. We can all be kind of messy – but instead of soap or sanitizer, the only thing that really cleanses our souls is fire.³ It is worth it – not only for the peace it offers in this “dark valley”, but for the eternal reward that awaits. Allow him to purify you. Beg him to help you trust. He is Good. He will do it.

³ See Malachi 3:2.