

## Fourth Sunday of Easter - The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

April 25, 2021.

***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. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil for you are with me, your rod and your staff— they comfort me.*** (Psalm 23)

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is always **Good Shepherd Sunday, also the World Day of Prayer for Vocations**. This year we hear the most familiar and cherished portions of scripture from John's gospel where Jesus says "**I am the good shepherd.**" (10:11-18). Over the centuries, this image of Jesus as the good shepherd and his followers as sheep has been, for whatever reasons, very appealing. The amount of stained glass, painting, music and poetry that it has inspired is truly staggering, and the number of sermons, articles, hymns, retreats and meditations devoted to it is vast beyond measure. But on the subject of the Good Shepherd and his sheep, there is one thing that no one would think of asking. "**Why in the world do shepherds have sheep in the first place?**"

Shepherds probably keep sheep for pretty much the same reasons that ranchers keep cows, farmers keep chickens. Business. Being a shepherd and protecting and taking care of sheep has something to do with wool and mutton. We had been in Ireland and New Zealand watching shepherds shaved the sheep for the wool and watched YouTube documentary on how shepherds in China preserved the slaughtered sheep with wine and salt and ate every part of it whole year round. Their family wear woollen clothes or put on woollen blankets to keep warm and enjoy the taste of mutton. From generation to generation, they passed on and polished the sewing techniques and recipes. Of course, they also trade the sheep. Sheep are their assets, their essentials, their lives, their joy. When we lived in Hong Kong fifty years ago, we put on woollen undershirts, woollen jackets to keep warm in winters. But this little reality is seldom spoken of. So let's just ponder on these two things: **wool and mutton**.

One of the problems with this **shepherd-and-sheep business** is that sheep have a reputation as being passive, stupid, unimaginative, and dull. So if we are the sheep of our Lord's pasture, does that mean we are supposed to be like "typical sheep": just hanging around, occasionally getting lost, not doing much, looking cute and being taken care of because there is absolutely no way we could survive on our own? Besides, shepherds don't generally keep sheep as pets, maybe kids of shepherds do. There are many reasons for the whole enterprise, and expectations. The sheep are valuable. If the sheep don't produce, the shepherd is flat out of business. Which brings us back to wool and mutton. This is the piece of the Good Shepherd business that is about us; it's about the part we play in this familiar and comfortable talk about green pastures and still waters. The Lord expects things of us, and if we don't come through, well, there are no contingency plans.

Jesus promised to be our Good Shepherd. Jesus isn't going to leave us to the wolves or turn us into dog food if we don't produce. The Lord cares for us and has blessed us. He has laid down his life for us. His sacrifice, his love, his continued care are simply gifts. They are given without condition and without exception. We don't try to do stuff in the hope that God will be nicer to us or love us more. Nonetheless, there are expectations – there is the business of wool and mutton. The care that the Lord offers us is intended to lead to something, something real and substantial. We are to produce, to give back, from who we are, from what we can do, from what our situation in life is, from our various skills, abilities, resources and gifts. To keep the naked warm with the wool and to feed the hungry with mutton.

Hold it! I am sure you have heard the story about how the cow, the chicken and the pig want to give the farmer a surprise birthday breakfast. The cow said, "He can have a cup of fresh milk." The chicken said, "His favourite sunny side up. How about you, porky? He loves bacon and ham!" The pig pondered awhile and said, "For you two, it's only a little contribution. For me, it's total commitment, full sacrifice!" Same for sheep. If it wants to share the mutton with the hungry, it needs to sacrifice totally. Remember John 3:16: "**For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.**" And also in John 6:40: "**and I shall raise him up on the last day.**". As Christians we believe in Jesus's death and resurrection and is committed to serve; to reach out and to share; to pray; to increase in holiness and to tell the truth; to seek for justice and to be willing to sacrifice. Each and every one of us sheep has unique vocational call from the Lord and has purpose and worth, and that each is important. Each and every one of us can contribute, and is called to contribute, in one way or another, to the mission of the church. We can't be too young, too old, too new, too sick, too ordinary, too uneducated, too busy, or too anything to avoid the reality of wool and mutton. We are needed; and without us, without any single one of us, the mission and work of the Lord and his church are impoverished. We are valuable assets. As Pope Francis said, "**The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the gospel.**"

God's care and protection are always given that we might be better equipped for service. It always means that something special, something more, is expected. To be sure, Jesus is the Good Shepherd, he pays the price, and protects us and cares for us. That's the way it is. But there is more to it than this. We are valuable and important; and we have an essential role to play in all of this. God created each of us to be unique. He shaped us in a specific way for a special purpose only we can fulfill. Even though we are all sheep, we are all unique in wool and in mutton. As in Jeremiah 1:5, God says, "**Before I shaped you in the womb, I knew all about you. Before you saw the light of day, I had holy plans for you**" We are valuable, no matter who we are or where we're from. As Pope Francis said in his Angelus address Jan. 17, 2021 "**There are different ways of carrying out the plan that God has for each of us, which is always a plan of love. ... And the greatest joy for every believer is to respond to this call, to offer all of himself at the service of God and his brothers and sisters,**" This is true for every person, from the moment they are born. We're all differently abled and gifted, but God looks at us the same: with love. He's looking at how we use our spiritual gifts, talents, and abilities. And, he's helping us reach our unique potential. What is the vocation God is calling you for? **The mutton that we can share with others is our actions with which we nourish the lives of others. Do our attitudes feed the heart and enrich the lives of others? Are we capable of making others feel valuable, respected and worthy? May we be food for others today, and for days to come.**