

HOMILY SUNDAY EASTER 04 – A (Homily 02)

“Caring and Contemplation”

(Acts 2:14a, 36b-41; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:20-25; Jn 10:1-10)

John, an amateur photographer, loved taking pictures of old abandoned farmhouses. He would then frame them as gifts. Traveling through the countryside one day, a majestic old house caught his attention. Its unusual style, rustic colours and many windows spoke to him of past glory and life. However, there was a four strand barb wire fence between him and the house, making it very awkward to come any closer. He noticed that a short distance away there was a gate with a metal lever mechanism that looped over the post of the gate and applied pressure to keep it taut. He lifted the lever, the wire gate fell to the ground and he had easy access to the house for his photography. He felt deep gratitude for the farmer who had placed the gate there, as if it was for his purposes only, and for that simple yet marvellous invention of a lever mechanism to open the gate.

That incident brought to his mind this Sunday’s Gospel, in which the Lord Jesus reminds us that he is not only the Good Shepherd who cares for us, who wants an intimate relationship with us, but also the Gate that provides sure and safe access to good pasture in the reign of God. We are encouraged to believe in him, to pray to him, and to follow him in caring for others. As his sheep, we are to live lives of contemplation and caring.

The readings today really form two separate units. First, they firmly establish the identity of Jesus, and second, they remind us of what our response should and could be - contemplation and caring.

The first reading from Acts reminds us with certainty that God has made this crucified Jesus both Lord and Christ. He is the *Kyrios*, Lord, or God, along with the Father, and also the Messiah, or Christ, the one sent by the Father, to reveal the love of the Father for us and the power that love has to work in our lives.

The psalm response sings to us the reality that this Lord is our shepherd, who provides for our deepest needs, refreshes and restores us, cares for us and gives us abundant blessings.

St. Peter in the second reading reminds us that this Christ suffered for us; bore our sins to free us from sin, and thus became the shepherd and guardian of our souls. The extent that Jesus cared for us comes through loud and clear.

In the Gospel, Jesus himself teaches the disciples that he is the good shepherd who yearns for an intimate relationship with his sheep, and who is also the Gate, or the way to the fullness of life.

It is worth noting that Jesus contrasts himself as one who cares, with those who came before him, identified as thieves and bandits who do not care for others. The word for thief used here is *kleptēs*, from which the word kleptomania is derived. Kleptomania is an illness, a moral inability to prevent oneself from stealing. The wife of an equipment dealer years ago in the city of North Battleford was known as a kleptomaniac. She could not resist shoplifting and would often walk out of stores without paying for the goods. Thankfully, even at that time, both her husband and the local merchants were aware of the disease, and the goods would be returned. The disease, however, was an acute embarrassment to the husband and family.

That same word, *kleptēs* or thief, is the one that St. John would use later in his Gospel to recount the anointing of Jesus at Bethany. When Mary poured the pure nard on Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair, Judas Iscariot, the one who was about to betray Jesus, protested that this money should have been given to the poor. John notes that "He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put in it."

In identifying himself as the Good Shepherd, and the religious authorities as thieves and bandits, then, Jesus was underlying the key quality of caring as the essential ingredient of God's love for us, and the key quality of our life as his discipleships. Jesus cared for us to the extent of suffering for us and giving his life for us. The religious authorities who made themselves his opponents did not care for the poor, were not really out to serve others. They had made religion into a self-serving system that actually prevented the poor from having access to God's love. Their system left the poor, less educated and morally weak feeling inferior, unworthy and excluded.

Jesus, who is Lord and Saviour, Messiah, Shepherd and Gate, came to reveal to us the Father's gratuitous, gracious love, to open for us the way into the reign of God, to provide easy access to God's abundant love to all who would believe in him.

That puts the emphasis on our response to Jesus as Lord, Christ, Shepherd and Gate. The first reading urges us to repent, to change our ways, to be sorry for our sins, and to receive the forgiveness that Jesus waits to give us. In a sense, the

sacrament of reconciliation becomes the Gate or the preferred way that we can enter into this graced life of God's love. Repentance, confession, forgiveness, healing of our weak moral nature, a commitment to never sin that way again and genuine attempts to make amends is the way to new life.

The Gospel urges us to put our complete faith in Jesus as Shepherd and Gate. That faith lived out in prayer and love for others places us within the pasture of the reign of God. We will experience peace, serenity, joy, freedom from guilt, fear and negative attitudes as we daily walk in an intimate relationship with God, and closer relationships with others.

That intimate relationship with God is enhanced as we ponder, study, pray with and try to live the teachings of the scriptures, Reading the bible, praying with the scriptures, and spending time in silent contemplation is one of the best ways that we can truly be sheep of the Good Shepherd, getting to know his voice.

This first year of the *Returning To Our Roots* process that we have begun in our Archdiocese of Keewatin-The Pas is focused on prayer. One person who was spending time in quiet contemplation during a retreat one day suddenly became aware of an inner conviction that the clergy and pastoral ministers could perhaps help parishioners learn to pray the *Regina Caeli* during this Easter season, as part of this process. That is an example of the Good Shepherd speaking to one of his sheep, and an example of a member of the flock, truly listening to the voice of the Good Shepherd.

To not try to be more docile sheep attentive to God's Word is to steal from God, and even from others and ourselves, the love that God wants to give us through his Word. Let us resolve to respond to the love of God revealed in Jesus as Lord, Christ, Shepherd and Gate by praying more sincerely to God and caring more fully for others from the heart. As a response to that inspiration coming from one's person's prayer, let us pray together the words of the *Regina Caeli*, an ancient traditional prayer of the Church said during the Easter season that means Queen of Heaven:

V. Queen of Heaven, rejoice, alleluia!

R. For He whom you were chosen to bear,
 alleluia!

V. Has risen as He said, alleluia!

R. Pray for us to God, alleluia!

V. Rejoice and be glad, O Virgin Mary,

alleluia!

R. For the Lord has truly risen, alleluia!

Let us pray:

O God, you gave joy to the world through the resurrection of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ; grant that through his Mother, the Virgin Mary, we may obtain the joys of everlasting life, through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

As sheep who are following the Good Shepherd, let us believe in Jesus, to pray to him, and follow him in caring for others. May we grow in our ability to lead lives full of contemplation and caring.