

“My sheep listens to my voice and follow me!”

The fourth Sunday of Easter is known as *Good Shepherd Sunday*. It is also the *World Day of Prayer for Vocations*. The scripture lessons are about shepherds. Each year on this Sunday, we reflect on the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd who devotedly takes care of his flock.

It is interesting to note that Jesus, by birth is a carpenter, trained by Joseph. His disciples were mostly fishermen. Then why Jesus chose the image and name “Shepherd” to qualify himself?

It’s very common in both OT and NT to use the term “sheep” to refer to the *people of God*. The ‘collective sense and innocence’ of sheep might have inspired to this. But if we observe closely the sheep, we are able to find a few particularities about them.

Primarily, it’s *hard to train the sheep*: they love to do what they want; They easily resemble the people of God, who, even after continuous exhortations, choose their own likes and wishes.

Secondly, sheep is one of the animals having the *shortest of eyesight*. They can see clearly only a few meters ahead. That is why, once missing the group, they easily miss the way and go astray. Actually, it’s the shepherd, who functions as the *eye* of the sheep.

Thirdly, the capacity for *self defense is lowest* in the sheep. At the face of difficulties, they can only run to escape. Being very weak to defend itself, it’s the shepherd who is the true defence and protection for them. As the sheep seems so weak not to have a safe life without the shepherd, the scripture wants to teach us the great truth that *man cannot live safe without God. He needs God, to protect him and to lead him safely*.

The image of the Shepherd is often applied to God, as well as to the leaders of the people. Just as the Palestinian shepherds knew each sheep

of their flock by *name*, and the sheep knew their shepherd and *his voice*, so Jesus knows each one of us by our name, he knows our needs, our merits and our weaknesses. Jesus loves us as we are, with all our limitations, and he expects us to receive and return his love by keeping his word. He also reminds us of thieves, the unfaithful shepherds.

Some people come into our life with a little lamp. After meeting with them, our life becomes more illuminated. But there are yet others who bring in darkness to our life, that eventually make us lose our energy that we already had. The story of the shepherd and the thief in today's gospel remind us of such people.

The fundamental difference between the thief and the shepherd is their motives. The deeds of the thief reveal that his goal is his own goodness, while the shepherd's intent is to have life, life in abundance for all those who come to him.

Whom am I similar to? What happened to those lives that I entered? Did they experience greater light and life, or did they feel the pain of losing energy? The gospel is about the true qualities of the shepherd.

Without Jesus the Sh., to guide us and protect us, *we* are easy prey for the *spiritual wolves* of this world. Jesus alone heals the wounds of our souls. He is the one who goes in search of his stray lambs and heals his sick ones, saves them at any cost, even at the risk of his own life.

Hence, today's gospel is offering us both *comfort and challenge*. The comforting good news is that Jesus the Good Shepherd knows us personally and care for us. There is a mutual bond of love and intimacy as he provides for us and loves us. The challenge is that we need to be *good shepherds* to those around us, as well as need to become *good sheep* to Jesus, our Shepherd, by listening to his voice.