Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 7, 2017

Acts 2:14, 36-41

Psalm 23

1 Peter 2:20-25

John 10:1-10

“So Jesus said again, “Amen, amen, I say to you, I am the gate for the sheep….I am the gate.”

Jesus as the Good Shepherd is so near and dear to us. How does He see himself?

With the help of Anthony Cassidy (Scripture in Church, Vol. 47, No.186, Dominican Publications, Dublin, Ireland, 2017, p. 38), let me explain.

The image of Jesus as the gate of the sheepfold is not so easy for us to understand. A sheepfold at that time would be a circular stone wall with an opening for the animals to enter for protection at night from the predators. Very often, branches of thorns (a natural from of barbed wire) would be placed on top of the wall to deter soft-bellied creatures such as foxes from climbing over and gaining access to the flock. The weak point in this defense was the opening, as sheepfolds in remote areas did not usually have gates – or gatekeepers. So the shepherd would lie down across the opening and his body would serve as the gate. In that sense, the shepherd is laying down his life to protect the members of the flock. Anthony Cassidy.

Another interesting point that Anthony Cassidy brings to light is this.

The first relationship between the shepherd and the flock is characterized by personal knowledge: the shepherd knows each member of the flock by name, and the individual recognizes the sound of the shepherd’s voice. Trust is also an element in this relationship: the members of the flock follow behind of their own free will – there is no dog to keep them in line.

 It is interesting that in the Psalm today, the poet begins by talking about the Lord in the third person, but halfway through switches to speaking to the Lord directly as *You* (Italics his): we might note that his change occurs not when the psalmist is thinking about a positive situation, green pastures, restful waters, but rather absolute darkness, where trust in the Lord’s presence is required more than ever. (Anthony Cassidy)

And when do we hear the 23rd Psalm (“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want”) most often?- at wakes and funerals and burials.

Let me share with you what I learned from Philip Keller in his book “A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23” ( Mass Market Paperback Publisher: Zondervan (April 29, 2007)).

“I shall not want…” The good shepherd is the owner who delights in his flock. For him there is no greater reward, no deeper satisfaction, than that of seeing his sheep contented, well fed, safe, and flourishing under his care.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures…” For sheep to lie down, it has to be free from fear, social tension, free from the aggravations from pests, and free from hunger. If any of these is present, a sheep will not lie down at all. The presence of the master puts the sheep at ease.

“Though I walk through the valley…” The flock needs to go to higher ground where the pastures lie. They often go through valleys of adversity with their storms and rockslides and darkness.

 “Your rod and your staff they comfort me…” The rod is a defense against danger and a discipline against misbehavior. The staff brings sheep together, especially the newborn to the ewes. The staff draws sheep close for inspection, especially the shy and the timid sheep. The staff guides the sheep especially through new paths or gates. And the staff saves the sheep from drowning.

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall live in the house of the Lord forever.” Here is a sheep so utterly satisfied with his lot in life, so fully contented with the care it receives, so much ‘at home’ with the shepherd, that there is not a shred of desire for change. (Philip Keller)

If we take our time with our psalm and our Gospel, think about each picture they paint, isn’t it wonderful that we can say, “The Lord is my Good Shepherd, I shall not want.”