

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More
April 25, 2021 Streaming Mass
Easter 4th Sunday - Year B

Helen Keller, the noted author, activist, and lecturer, who became deaf and blind as the result of a childhood illness, when asked, if she could have either of those two senses that she lacked—sight and hearing—restored, which of the two would she prefer to have, she replied that she would want to be able to hear. This is not surprising, for it is hearing that is the basis of all communication and, the basis for all relationships, providing people with the possibility of being able to know each other; to be open to each other; to reveal themselves to each other; to be friends and lovers to each other. So, when some relationship is under stress or strain, what we may hear one person saying to another is, "You're not listening; you're not hearing me."

In today's Gospel, when Jesus presents himself as the Good Shepherd, as the one whose voice the sheep are able to hear, we begin to see how Jesus is trying to clarify the nature of the relationship He intends to have with His disciples. It is a relationship that is to be close, intimate and caring. Jesus uses this metaphor of Himself as the shepherd calling His sheep, and the sheep recognizing His voice, to illustrate the affinity, the bond between shepherd and sheep, between Himself and His disciples. Our ability to hear is what links us in the most essential way to the world around us, to those aspects of our environment that are most important—the realm of personal relationships. So, Jesus, by employing this image of himself as a Good Shepherd is saying that He wants to relate to each of us in a way that is deep, that is real, that is life-sustaining.

Jesus presents himself as the Good Shepherd, that is, the ideal shepherd, the model shepherd. Jesus is contrasting Himself to those figures in Jewish history and tradition who also represented or called shepherds, i.e., Israel's rulers and priests. They were supposed to take care of the people entrusted to their care, but more often they used their position for their own gain and profit. Too many of Israel's kings and high priests were bad shepherds. They had their own interests, not the interests of those entrusted to their care, at heart.

But this metaphor of the Good Shepherd caring for his sheep speaks to us in a limited way, because most of us have never come in contact with an actual shepherd or with sheep. Probably, the closest we've ever come to a shepherd is some high school kid who had a summer job taking care of lambs in a children's petting zoo. So, for a moment let's switch this metaphor from the world of agriculture, with which most of us have had little experience, to the world of finance, with which we are more familiar. Let us imagine Jesus not so much as the Good Shepherd but as the model the

ideal CEO. Of course, it's a stretch, but the relationship is the same. Neither is to work simply for their own self-aggrandizement, nor for the exploitation of those whom they oversee, but for the benefit, the growth and well-being of those entrusted to their care.

In ancient Israel, a shepherd was usually a teenager, someone who did not actually own the sheep, but who could be trusted to watch over them and look out for them. In the world of finance we speak of a financial manager's fiduciary responsibility to the stockholders' or investors' interests. It is this same notion as protecting the interests, the assets, whether it be sheep or capital, entrusted to one's supervision. Someone like the recently deceased embezzler Bernie Madoff would be considered a bad shepherd. Obviously, there are no statues of Jesus as the good CEO but, hopefully, you get the point---namely, this notion of what has come to be called servant leadership.

This notion of servant leadership can be extended to other spheres of governance. Just as corporate executives have their jobs, not just for themselves, but for the sake of their stockholders and investors (and employees too, because they are part of the "flock") so, also, schools exist for the sake of the students and not for the teachers; hospitals exist for the sake of the patients and not the doctors; churches exist for the sake of the congregants and not the clergy, government exists for the sake of the citizenry and not the elected officials. Whatever the institution or organization, those entrusted with leadership or management or governance, have an obligation to look out for the well-being of those whose interests are entrusted to their care. It is not just an opportunity to profit at the expense of others.

The goal of Jesus' ministry is to have this intimate relationship with His disciples--that His ministry serves our well-being, more than His? Jesus says in another place in St. John's Gospel, "I came that you may have life and have it in abundance"--that you may have life. St. Irenaeus put it another way, "The glory of God is the human being who is fully alive." So, to understand Jesus as the Good Shepherd is to see that His only desire is that we achieve what is best for us, in the fullest sense possible. Everything that Jesus is about is to help us become better, more authentic human beings, and that, Jesus says, is what pleases God, that is what glorifies God. In a sense, the more human we are, again in the best possible way, we realize the image of God within us and thus give glory to the God who created us.

Easter is given as that time to ponder what Jesus is all about. Let us pray that we can deepen that relationship that we can become more attuned to the voice of the Good Shepherd and following him in the paths that lead to a fuller, a deeper, a more authentic life.