



Homily for 5/3/2020

4th Sunday of Easter

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In the Gospel today Jesus presents the Pharisees with an image of the sheepfold. A sheepfold is the fenced off area for the sheep meant to keep them safe from wild animals as well as thieves and robbers. The way in or out of the sheepfold is the gate. The gate is opened and closed by the gatekeeper. The Lord makes a pretty obvious declaration that the one who enters the sheepfold by climbing over the fence and not going through the gate is a thief and a robber. Now, Jesus is using a figure of speech, obviously, when he is talking about the sheepfold. But what is he really talking about? He is trying to get his listeners to understand the relationship of God to human beings. He likens heaven to the sheepfold and the people to the sheep.

He says that the false leaders of Israel, the bad kings, the corrupted prophets and those who profit off the Jewish faith, were like those thieves and robbers and not the true shepherd to lead the Flock to God and the safe-haven of heaven. On the other hand, the one who goes through the gate is the true shepherd. Jesus will call himself the shepherd just a few verses later, saying, “I am the Good Shepherd.” He is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Ezekiel when he says, “thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when some of his sheep have been scattered abroad, so will I seek out my sheep; and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness...” (Ez 34:11)

However, in the passage we are given for this Sunday we hear Jesus make another somewhat startling assertion. Not only is he the shepherd, he also calls himself the gate. This is a curious figure of speech indeed. What is he getting at in this? It is only through the gate that sheep can enter into the safe haven where they are kept safe. Jesus is saying that he is not only the one who will lay down his life for his sheep but that he himself is also the way into heaven. Only if we pass through him will we enter. This will later be made more profound when we realize that he intends for all who come to him to actually and sacramentally be joined to him. Jesus will also say this about himself in other ways throughout revelation: I am the way the truth and the life. It is also very profoundly intimated when he calls himself the bread of life. Unless you eat this bread you will not have life within you. You become what you eat. This assimilation to Christ, being made one with him is salvation. It is not enough to simply agree with him or walk along side him. You have to become one with him.

This is precisely what St. Peter was preaching in the first moments of the Church when right after the Holy Spirit had descended upon them at Pentecost. He was preaching to people how to be saved. He was proclaiming “that God has made both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

The Scriptures relate that the Israelites were cut to the quick and asked, “What are we to do, my brothers?” In other words, “How can we be saved?” Notice that the answer wasn’t simply, “Just imitate me as a good student does a teacher.” Nor does he say, “Join my philosophical movement.” He also doesn’t say, “Accept in your heart that Jesus is your personal Lord and Savior and you will be saved.” Rather, St. Peter says a very Catholic thing, “Repent, and be baptized.” He leads them into the sacramental life of the Church. Peter even goes further and declares that baptism is “for the forgiveness of sins.” It is not just a symbol, it is efficacious. It actually does something to our souls.

Now, what do we profess about Baptism? The Catechism says in §1213: “Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit (*vitae spiritualis ianua*), and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; **we become members of Christ**, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission: ‘Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word.’



Baptism is the gate to the life of the Spirit. Sound familiar? Through baptism we “become members of Christ.” What St. Peter said was that in order to be saved they had to repent of their former way of sin and error and become one with Christ. This is something more than just following a movement. It is Theosis, Divinization, recreation, being born again. A popular old-fashioned way of calling baptism is “christening”. What does it mean to “Christen”? We have only by association known it to mean taking on a new name. Etymologically, however, it means to make someone Christ. In Baptism we are joined to Christ as members are joined to the head of the body. The baptized have “put on Christ”. We become Christ bearers. That is the meaning of the white garment that is put on the christened child. The newly baptized Christian becomes one with Christ. This is the marriage between the Church and Jesus that makes up the “one flesh union” of the Mystical Body of Christ. We hear of this wedding in the Book of Revelation:

“Alleluia!

The Lord has established his reign,

[our] God, the almighty.

Let us rejoice and be glad

and give him glory.

For the wedding day of the Lamb has come,

his bride has made herself ready.

She was allowed to wear

a bright, clean linen garment.”

The Bride is the Church. The Church is made up of all the baptized. We are each made a cell in the body that died and rose again and now reigns gloriously in heaven. This is why the Church is so important. It is not enough for us to simply say yes to Jesus. We actually have to commune with him. We are his beloved and he is our lover in a mystical marriage and it is not good for us to be apart. It is also why we are so saddened by the current pandemic that is keeping us from this sacramental encounter with Christ. No matter how much we can make the best of being at home and praying in the ways that are allowed to us, nothing can replace the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and nothing can substitute fully for Holy Communion. We were made one with the Gate at our Baptism, but every time we assist at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, we renew our oneness with him – a renewal of our wedding vows. In Holy Communion, we allow the Good Shepherd into our hearts, and He makes the green pastures we long for become reality in the interior of our being. Here the pledge of future glory is made. “The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.” Let the one who thirsts come forward, and the one who wants it to receive the gift of life-giving water.” We have heard the good news that soon there will be public masses offered, even if it will be small and regulated at first. This breathes new energy into our souls longing to be near this tremendous lover of souls. In the meanwhile, as we remain at home on this fourth Sunday of Easter, let us pray for that day when we will be able to be reunited with our Lord as His body. Don’t forget that you are already one with him in spirit. If we unite ourselves now in hope with the Lord who dwells in our hearts spiritually, we will have prepared ourselves for that day when we are able to embrace him once more in the day of our communion. You were made for him and you cannot find your full happiness without him. May prayer for you is that that day will be just as filled with anticipation and excitement as the day you made your First Holy Communion. May Jesus Christ be praised!