

Good Shepherding

“Jesus said: ‘I am the good shepherd.’” (John 10:11)

Thursday morning Gloria and I returned from a wondrous ten days trip to the Holy Land. We traveled from the foothills of Galilee to the Judean desert, from the River Jordan to the Dead Sea, from Nazareth to Jerusalem, visiting sites along the way which figure prominently in the life of Jesus. Walking in his footsteps was truly the experience of a lifetime.

Last Sunday in the Old City of Jerusalem, for example, we walked the Via Dolorosa, pausing at each of the fourteen stations of cross and attending Mass at the last station, the empty tomb, in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. In Bethlehem, on our way to the Church of Nativity, we stopped at the Church of the Shepherds in the Field where, according to tradition, angels first proclaimed our Savior’s birth to *shepherds watching their flocks by night*.

The word “shepherd” appears more than 500 times in the Bible, beginning with the first “*keeper of sheep*,” Abel, Cain’s brother. Ancient Israel’s greatest heroes -- Abraham, Moses, David, Amos-- were shepherds; and, of course, Scripture portrays God in the words of the best known and best loved of all the 150 psalms, the 23rd-- “*The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want...*” Here God is depicted as a faithful and good shepherd who leads his flock into well-being and abundance, keeping it safe from every danger.

Not all shepherds mentioned in the Bible, however, were *good* ones. A few were quite the opposite. As God’s anointed deputies on earth, kings were referred to as

shepherds of Israel, but, sometimes they turned out to *bad* shepherds-- wolves in shepherds' clothing, so to speak. In response, God raised up prophets like Ezekiel to denounce them in words like these:

Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them. (Ezekiel 34:2-6)

No one to search or seek for them until Jesus of Nazareth entered human history. Jesus, whom Christians believe fulfilled Ezekiel's prophesy, frequently drew on the image of 'kind shepherd' to describe himself. In today's reading from **John**'s gospel, he explicitly says, *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."*

(As an aside, one of the sites Gloria and I explored in the Holy Land was the ruins of Caesarea Maritima, the impressive seaport city on the Mediterranean built by Herod the Great to honor Emperor Caesar Augustus. Today at the entrance to the remarkably intact Roman amphitheater stand three ancient statues... one of them, most probably from a church in the Byzantine era, depicts Jesus carrying a lamb on his shoulders.)

At Masses during the month of May throughout the diocese and here at Transfiguration, our little ones, our lambs, will be making their first communion. The Eucharist, of course, is one important way Jesus, down through the centuries, continues to be an abiding presence to his flock.

Jesus promises those who follow him faithfully not only abundance, well-being and protection from harm, as described so beautifully in the 23rd Psalm, but also, eternal life. It is, therefore, completely understandable why close to one third of the world's population, over 2 billion people, claim to be in *his* flock? Of course, claiming to be in *his* flock is one thing; acting like it is something else entirely.

A fact which people of biblical times understood quite well, but we who live in non-agrarian societies need to be reminded of, is that sheep are *totally* dependent creatures. Left to fend for themselves, they won't survive. It's the shepherd who cares for them, nurtures them, feeds and keeps them out of trouble. This, of course, is what Jesus offers to do for us, *if* we let him.

I must admit, however, that I'm not entirely comfortable being compared to a sheep. Sheep, after all, have some rather unappealing characteristics. For instance, they lose their way easily, have no sense of orientation, lack a homing instinct, mostly look down and care little about their own welfare. Why? Because their herd instinct is so strong that it blocks their ability to foresee dangerous consequences. They follow their leader without thinking, sometimes a Judas goat leading to slaughter. If one sheep goes over a cliff, the whole herd follows blindly, going over as well. Or if the lead sheep refuses to eat, the rest of the flock won't eat either and they all die of starvation.

Likewise, we humans too experience and *cause* tragic consequences when our herd instinct overwhelms our intelligence or conscience. The most egregious example (and I've preached on this point before) -- Nazi Germany and the Holocaust-- when those responsible, the vast majority of whom claimed to be Christian, followed the quintessential "bad" shepherd -- Adolph Hitler -- and eleven million innocent people,

including six million Jews, 1.5 million children, co-religionists of Jesus, were slaughtered in the name of *racial* purity. Beginning with the metaphorical first murder, when Cain slew the first shepherd, his brother Abel, history is replete with examples of human depravity. Genocide has happened before, since, and is happening now in Darfur, but thankfully, not on the scale of the European Holocaust of the twentieth century.

(And yes, in case you're wondering, in Jerusalem Gloria and I visited Yad Vashem, the national Authority for the Remembrance of Martyrs and Heroes of the Holocaust. That too was a most powerful experience—particularly the children's memorial.)

Today in many Islamic countries, as we all well know, suicide bombers, including women and children, following the lead of hard line clerics who preach hatred, kill innocent people, mostly Muslims of the same or different sects, in the name of Allah, the same God worshipped by Jews and Christians in the same Holy Land. Similarly, tribal strife in Africa daily results in countless instances of brutality and death. The examples go on and on. Any wonder why there's been no shortage of books lately denouncing religion, including Richard Dawkins' [The God Delusion](#) and Christopher Hitchens' [God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything](#).

We humans tend to associate with people like ourselves, with whom we share racial, cultural, economic and religious characteristics and values. Ever since Cain touched off the first war between farmers and shepherds, a subtle lie has persisted in human thinking: Those *other* people are not like us. They're less important, less valuable, less *human*. Taken to the extreme, such thinking too often yields catastrophic results.

What extremists and hardliners, religious or otherwise, fail to understand is that the Good Shepherd calls us all, “from *every* nation, race, people and tongue.” In his flock genuine differences exist as distinctions, not separations. They add color and texture to the community of believers; they don’t alienate, marginalize or demonize. There’s no dominant or superior group in his flock. We’re all equally beloved children of the same God and the family resemblance is strong. That’s what distinguishes “the flock he tends.” That describes the God I worship. Like our ancestors in the faith, therefore, we too need to be wary of *wolves in shepherd’s clothing*, those who would lead us astray.

Young brothers and sisters, do you follow a leader or a crowd that puts you or others at risk? Yielding to negative peer pressure, for example, do you smoke cigarettes or, though underage, drink alcohol, sometimes to excess, then operate a motor vehicle? Do you bully youngsters outside your comfort zone? Do you disrespect women; deride gays or lesbians; belittle the disabled? Do you ignore what your parents ask you to do because of what others might think?

Dear friends all, when confronted by a moral dilemma, do you tend to do the right thing, or the popular one? Are you willing to listen to the other side of an argument, or do you have all the answers? Can you disagree without becoming disagreeable? Do you stereotype outsiders? Relish telling racist jokes? Are you willing to speak out against injustice even when it’s controversial? Are you a positive role model for our children, the lambs of his flock?

You, like me, may prefer not being compared to sheep, but it’s incontrovertible that we do, in fact, often act like them? There is, of course, a big difference between us and sheep. We have intellect, conscience and free will, so we can *choose* our shepherd

and whether to follow or not. Choosing the Good Shepherd ...easy. Following Him
faithfullynot so easy.

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Acts 4:8-12; 1John 3:1-2; John 10:11-18.

Fourth Sunday of Easter. May 3, 2009. (Cycle B).