

Easter 4B (5/3/09 – *Christ – the REAL Shepherd*)

In the Name JESUS. [Amen]

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!]

Sometimes it seems a bit odd that so soon after *Easter*, the readings take us to events and Words of Christ long **before** *Easter*. I suppose that **must** be so ... since there is relatively little after Christ's *Resurrection* in the Gospels – except for a handful of appearances of our Savior to His disciples while they were cowering behind locked doors ... or fishing on the Sea of Galilee ... as they waited for their risen Lord to show Himself again. What seems particularly odd about today's *Holy Gospel Reading* is that it points so specifically to Christ's death – though the *Resurrection* is in there.

But there is a very good reason for this *Gospel* to come so soon after *The Resurrection of Our Lord*. For, although we have not yet celebrated our Lord's *Ascension*, we know it is coming – thus both in the Church Year and in our daily lives, we need to be assured that Christ's *Resurrection* has meaning for us still today ... that Christ Himself is still working among us ... and that **that was always** the plan. So let's just dig into our *Holy Gospel* for this *Fourth Sunday of Easter* – as well as portions of the other *Lessons* appointed for the day.

This Sunday could also be called *Good Shepherd Sunday* – that is the theme of our *Gospel* ... and the well-known and beloved *Psalms* appointed for this day. Jesus begins by saying: ***I am the Good Shepherd*** [JN 10.11]. Then very quickly He explains just what it means that He is the Good Shepherd: ***The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.*** And this already well-known analogy of the people of God as His dearly-loved flock of sheep and the Lord Himself as our Shepherd is full of deep meaning. Already in the Old Testament, God spoke of His children as “sheep”. And that means something. As those who know such animals explain in all-too-vivid detail, sheep aren't the brightest among the domesticated animals. Left to themselves, sheep will overgraze the land – the shepherd must continually move them from place to place ... so that the sheep have sustenance, and the pasture can replenish. Left to themselves, sheep will stay away from any short of running water – leaving them with only stagnant, possibly contaminated water ... or no water at all. Knowing this reality gives us better understanding why the shepherd-psalmist, David, says of the Lord: ***He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.*** [PSA 23.2] David is pointing out the **essential** work of our Good Shepherd to sustain us ... keep us alive – even when there are no enemies threatening.

This says something about how we are, as people. We **need** the Good Shepherd to make us lie down in the green pastures of His Word – otherwise, we will not be

able to live ... and grow. We won't do it on our own – left alone ... according to our sinful flesh ... we would keep going over dead words ... mere worldly words and wisdom. And although that wisdom can be a very good thing, it **can't** do anything for us in the long run ... it **can't** do anything for us spiritually. If that's all we would have – and remember, as not-so-bright sheep that's **all** we would ever “graze” on ... over and over again ... until even that was gone – then we would be dead spiritually ... without hope ... **forever**. For, by that worldly word and wisdom we couldn't know our Good Shepherd – it can give us absolutely **no** saving knowledge of God. But that's what we humans **try** to do ... again and again – know God by our own means and wisdom. And like dumb sheep, we're too ignorant on our own – spiritually – to do anything else **but** look to our own worldly wisdom in our attempts to come close to God.

What's more, because of our sinfulness, we even fail on the worldly level. For all the bravado of the world, look at where we are. Like ignorant, foolish sheep, the world – and we with them ... at least according to our flesh – we keep grazing over the same ground. The world – and our flesh's – answer to the problems of the world is to cry for peace, understanding, and tolerance; but there **is** no real peace ... no real understanding ... no real tolerance. Those who cry the loudest for tolerance are completely **intolerant** of the Church and the things of God. So they cry out: *Religion is the problem. Look at what evil it causes!* All they while they are like sheep over-grazing the same dead field.

For our natural, earthly flesh is so corrupted by sin that we can't even see – we don't even understand ... or have the slightest clue ... like dumb sheep – that we are grazing over dead ground that cannot possibly give us any life. And in desperation our flesh turns to the stagnant, poisoned waters of our own “wisdom” and “ingenuity” to try to refresh our fainting and dying souls. Unless Christ our Good Shepherd leads us to the green pastures and the still waters of His Word and Sacraments, our souls shall **never** be restored – we can't do it on our own ... we can't find them ourselves.

But Christ **IS** *the Good Shepherd* ... Who *lays down His life for the sheep* ... Who *makes* us *lie down in green pastures* ... *leads* us *beside still waters* ... *restores* our *soul* ... and *leads* us *in paths of righteousness for His Name's sake*. [PSA 23.2-3] Our Savior is no *hired hand* – He is the Good Shepherd ... Who owns us (since He created us **and** bought us back again from our slavery to sin, death, and devil by laying down His life on the Cross ... shedding His holy precious Blood for the forgiveness of all our sins ... for our reconciliation to the Father and our eternal salvation). Christ is no hired hand – no charlatan. He didn't flee when He saw the wolf coming ... He didn't leave His sheep and flee ... He didn't allow the wolf to snatch and scatter us [JN 10.12]. *For He cares for you*

[1Pt 5.7].

Your Good Shepherd didn't run away from the wolf of sin, death, devil, and hell. Quite the contrary! He took sin into Himself – **all** your sin ... **all** the sin of **all** people (even those who ultimately reject Him and His work for their salvation). Indeed, Holy Scripture says that *for our sake* Christ *Who knew no sin* was *made to be sin* [2COR 5.21]. Christ your Good Shepherd did not flee from that wolf – rather, He became Man in the weakness of your human flesh ... baptized with the sins of the whole world ... so that He might bear them up in Himself and take them away on His Cross.

Your Good Shepherd didn't leave you and flee the wolf of death – rather, when the fullness of time had come, He knowingly went to Gethsemane where He would be betrayed. And although He could have called down *more than twelve legions of angels* [MT 26.53] – more than 12,000 angels! – He did not even allow the disciples to defend Him ... but willingly let Himself be roughly carted off ... falsely accused ... mistreated, mocked, flogged ... and did not answer a word ... so that His fate would be sealed according to plan established by the Triune God before the foundations of the world. Christ went resolutely to the Cross ... to die the death that you and I deserve because of our sin ... to *lay down His life for the sheep* ... that He *might take it up again* [JN 10.11,17]. Your Good Shepherd allowed the jaws of death to devour Him ... put Him in the dust of the tomb. Then He snatched His life back. And by His victorious and glorious *Resurrection* in turn devoured death and the grave Himself ... opening heaven to all believers ... flooding the earth with life and immortality!

Your Good Shepherd didn't leave you and flee from the wolfish devil – who is constantly, like a roaring lion, prowling and seeking to devour you. Quite the contrary! He confronted satan – again and again – and summarily beat him ... **for us** and **for our salvation!** Indeed, after His victory over sin, death, and devil, Christ victoriously descended into hell to declare Himself champion and Lord over all ... **especially** over sin, death, devil, and hell. And in so doing – by confronting **all** that might harm us as sheep – Christ has proven Himself to indeed be our gracious Lord and Good Shepherd.

Now He forever leads and guides you on the way by His Word ... by the Law and the Gospel – which are your daily staff and stay. Thus your Good Shepherd feeds and nourishes you ... providing for you all that you need for salvation and eternal life. He gives you to drink freely and deeply from the waters of the River of Life, unto peace and quietness in the forgiveness of all your sin. He feeds you not only with the green grass of the Word, but also with the Bread of Life – which is the Body of Christ Himself! He pours out the overflowing Chalice of His holy and precious Blood – which is the New Testament of forgiveness, eternal life and

salvation.

And for this continuing purpose – your eternal salvation – the great Good Shepherd of us all calls, ordains, and sends pastors (shepherds) under Himself, to guard and guide and feed the flock ... not as hirelings who care not for the sheep, but as true undershepherds of His flock whose very lives are called and committed to service ... who speak with the Voice and authority of Christ Jesus Himself – in His Name ... and in His stead – according to His divine command. Christ your crucified and risen Good Shepherd still works in your life today – to raise you up by the Gospel of your forgiveness and life in Him when you are laid low by your sin and the condemnation of the Law ... to cause you to know your Good Shepherd, and your dear Father in heaven, even as you are known and loved ... to gather you, again and again, as often as you have been scattered, into the safety of His sheepfold ... to keep you close to the quiet waters of your Baptism ... to keep the wolf at bay by the Word of the Gospel of His work on the Cross for you ... and to nurture you by the Feast of Salvation, at the Table of the Lord, within His House forever and ever.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!]

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. [Amen]