

Fourth Sunday of Easter – April 26, 2015

The people of Jesus' day knew plenty about shepherds and what it took to shepherd sheep. Today, we may know precious little about sheep and shepherding. Of course, we are familiar with the treasured image of shepherd in Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." In the psalm, we speak of ourselves as the ones God leads and feeds, the ones to whom God gives rest and longed-for refreshment. All of that is good and quite comforting. But it doesn't hold a candle to what Jesus says about us as his own sheep.

When Jesus talks about himself as the Good Shepherd, he says that he and his sheep know one another as intimately as he and the Father know each other. He promises that we can know him as he knows us, as he and the Father know one another. This means that as we choose the relationship Christ offers, we are choosing identification with him, a union of mind, heart, desire, and understanding.

But here's a question: how should this treasured image of Jesus as Good Shepherd resonate with us in 2015? Well, the image of lost sheep certainly describes many people today, including Catholics who have wandered away or somehow feel abandoned or unwelcome by the Church.

The thought that someone is out searching for them, eager to rescue them from the brambles of human temptation and entanglements. To know that someone longs to bind up their wounds, lift them up on strong shoulders, and carry them home, makes for a consoling message. It surely beats being scolded or humiliated.

The Good Shepherd will not give up on a single sheep. There's no talk of "cutting his losses" or the kind of "tough love" that lets a rebellious child suffer the consequences of his own actions before there can be any intervention or negotiated return home. As Pope Francis has said: "We tire of asking for God's forgiveness, but God never tires of offering it."

Today's gospel is for anyone responsible for others. It includes parents, teachers, priests and bishops. Their office cannot be just control or direction from a distance. A true shepherd, as Pope Francis has described, takes on the smell of the sheep.

When trouble comes, the shepherd does not flee or look only to his own interests. The Good Shepherd is responsible for protecting the flock from harm. How powerfully this image challenges us to care for one another. We are not in a comfort zone here. Rather, we are in a staging area for God's mission of mercy to the world.