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Acts 2:14a, 36-41
I Peter 2:20b-25
John 10:1-10

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
May 14-15, 2011

The scripture text for today has unusual clarity. I mean unusual because sometimes the readings are so complicated that many people will listen to the first two or three sentences, and then it just kind of goes somewhere.... But there is a lot of clarity today. It needs little historical background, which is my forte. I love to explain the historical backgrounds and put things in context. But today, there's no need for that. Today gives us an opportunity for reflection. Just reflection.

There is an old story that pastors used to tell years ago. The good pastor of a rich suburban parish was giving a little homily to the little ones gathered around him during children's Mass after the gospel. He wanted to explain to them about Jesus being the Good Shepherd, so he wanted to give an example. He told them that as the pastor he was like a shepherd and the members of his parish were like the sheep.

Then he said, "Now I'm going to ask you an important question: What does the shepherd do for the sheep?" A little guy in the front row raised his hand and answered, "He fleeces them?"

Unfortunately, it is true enough there are some shepherds who *do* go into the religion business for the purpose of fleecing, milking, and feeding on the sheep. But when the Bible speaks of the leaders of God's people as shepherds, the Word of God envisions leaders who will feed, protect, and feel with the people as a good shepherd does for the flock.

The title "shepherd" in the Hebrew Bible refers primarily to God, God the Father. The original word in there is "Yahweh." Of course, just in recent times, we from on high have said we're not going to use the word Yahweh. We're going to do the same thing as the Jews do. They use the word "Adonis." So as they are reading along and they see the word Yahweh, they say Adonis instead of that. So it's Lord. So Jesus shepherds His people, e.g. today's Responsorial Psalm 23: "**The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want**" is what we're being told.

Here God is portrayed as a faithful and good shepherd who leads the flock into well-being and abundance where they rest in green pastures. God keeps them safe from every danger in “the valley of darkness” so that they want for nothing and fear no evil -- even as they are surrounded by their foes – like thieves, wolves and lions. Kings of the Hebrew nations, they were divided, whom God appointed as His anointed deputies, were also referred to as shepherds. So the king was called Shepherd so and so.

Unfortunately some of these kings got only the title and not the qualities of a good shepherd. Instead of feeding the sheep entrusted to their care, they fed on them and abused them. God raised up prophets like Ezekiel to denounce such shepherds. Here are a few verses from Ezekiel’s prophecy to those so-called shepherds, which I’m sure most of you have never heard. He certainly didn’t mince any words:

“Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Shouldn’t shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you don’t feed the sheep. You haven’t strengthened the weak, you haven’t healed the sick, you haven’t bound up the injured, you haven’t brought back the strayed, you haven’t 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)”

Can you imagine standing before a king and saying that? Can you imagine standing before a priest and saying that? These verses beg the question: Is Ezekiel’s text timely for modern day people who say that the Bible is out of touch with today’s reality? Does this sound like a description of Christ’s flock today? Do we still have pastors or leaders of churches who are more interested in their own comfort than in the spiritual advancement of their flocks?

Do we have leaders who pontificate in their offices or churches and never take a step to reach out to the weak, the sick, those who have strayed? And in my seventy-seven years getting ready to celebrate my 50-year jubilee: I think I’m free to ask all kinds of questions that I wouldn’t have asked 25 years ago: **Do we still have church authorities who “rule” with little or no connection to the daily**

lives and nights of the people of God? Do they really know that their sheep who need to be fed are scattered all over the Map in Evangelical, Pentecostal, social club churches, and following new age gurus in search of spiritual nourishment? Are they really aware of that?

Because of the infidelity of the Old Testament shepherds to their divine calling, God made this promise to his people that **God** himself was going to be their shepherd, their good shepherd as predicted by Ezekiel (34:15-16). This promise was fulfilled in Jesus who declared himself to be the Good Shepherd who has come **“that they may have life, and have it abundantly”** (John 10:10). He is the Good Shepherd who lays down his own life to protect his flock.

At the time of Christ, shepherds, who by the way were considered the scum of society.... It is always interesting that they were the ones who first came at the birth of Jesus, these people who were looked down upon, and a little rightly so. They never took baths and things like that. And they smelled like sheep. So shepherds in Jesus day, guarding their flocks in the fields at night would build enclosures, sometimes if they were more permanent, walled by stones. But most of them made them with thorny briars. Now actually when I was in Israel, I saw these things, balls of thorny bushes. To this day, they blow around like tumbleweed out West. So what the shepherds do is collect those things and make a circle. At the end of the day, all the sheep of the village were corralled into the sheepfold through a very small opening. The shepherd would check them out to make sure they had no wounds, no thorns in their feet, or whatever. After they all got in there, then they would literally sleep lying across the single entrance — in a way actually becoming a gate -- so that before a wild beast could attack the sheep, it would have to attack the shepherds first. The shepherds took turns acting as guards and gate keepers. This image then helps us to understand when Jesus says, “I am the gate.”

Before Jesus left this world, he commissioned Peter to feed his lambs and tend his sheep (John 21:15-16). The work of shepherding God’s flocks is an ongoing task that is entrusted to the whole church. As today we celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday, we need to ask ourselves two important questions.

(1) Am I truly a faithful member of God’s flock or am I one of the lost ones? Only those sheep who follow the guidance of the Divine shepherd could ever hope to arrive at the green pastures or be safe from the ravenous wolves.

(2) How can I participate more closely in the work of shepherding God's flock? Every one of us in some way has a calling to do this. I don't care how old you are, starting at 5-6 years old up until the time that we die. We, too, must be shepherds. Today is a day to mull over how we can be better shepherds in our own state of life, reaching out with understanding, compassion — I love that word "compassion." It comes from two Latin words "com" means "with," "passio" means to "suffer." Compassion means to suffer with. To have compassion for people. To feel for them and feel their sadness, to feel whatever is bothering them. This is especially true for those who are weak, those who are confused, and even those who are lost dropouts of church and society. Don't be afraid to shepherd them. We have to be concerned about dropouts of the church, and even society. We pray that through us we may hear the loving voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd calling, not just to us, but through our mouths, "Come follow me." Amen.