

IV SUNDAY OF EASTER- 22nd APRIL 2018

THE GOOD SHEPHERD LAYS DOWN HIS LIFE FOR HIS SHEEP

- Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

John 10,11-18

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”

The image of Jesus as the good shepherd is without doubt the most known, and the most loved by Christians. But we must ask ourselves why this romantic and idyllic image provokes the ire of the listeners to the point that the Jewish authorities, at the end of Jesus' discourse, think that he has a demon, or is crazy and in the end try to stone him? Let's see what the evangelist John writes in chapter 10, 11-18.

Jesus presents himself and manifests himself as “*I am the good shepherd.*” God claims that I am is his name, it is the reply that he gave to Moses in the known episode of the burning bush. I am does not mean the name in the sense of identification that cannot define the reality divine, but an activity and what were God's activities? To be always at the side of his people. And Jesus claims the fullness of the divine condition and claims to be not the good shepherd but the unique shepherd. The evangelist does not use the Greek word that means the goodness of this shepherd, but the singularity. So we can translate as the good shepherd, meaning the excellent shepherd, the expected one that displaces all those who have claimed to be shepherds. This is why the authorities are alarmed: they understand that Jesus claims the role of the only shepherd of his flock.

And Jesus continues as the shepherd, the good one also the excellent one, how do we know this? By giving one's life for one's sheep. Jesus refers to the prophet Ezekiel where there are all these images of the true shepherd, but the image of Jesus' shepherd is something more, that of giving his life for his sheep and only protecting them.. Jesus' conduct as that of a shepherd is not an answer to the needs of the flock, but to proceed these needs. Therefore Jesus manifests himself as he who continually gives his life for his sheep.

Then Jesus speaks of those that do not recognise as shepherds, he does not say they are bad shepherds, but calls them *mercenaries*. What are mercenaries? Those that do their work but not for

love, or generosity but for convenience and interest. This is why the authorities are angry with Jesus because they understand they will be unmasked by his words. And what do these mercenaries do if not shepherds and have no sheep of their own? “ *he...sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.* ” This expression *cares nothing* has appeared in this gospel, it will appear referring to Judah, he being the thief and traitor . “ *He...cares nothing for the sheep.* ” The mercenary is he who acts only for his own profit, the shepherd is he who acts instead in the interest of the sheep.

Jesus repeats “ *I am the good shepherd.* ” And indicates the relationship that he has with his sheep, meaning the people “ *I know my own.* ” The verb to know indicates an intimate and profound experience with Jesus “ *...and my own know me...* ” it is a relationship of communicated love, of love received and communicated to others. “ *.. just as the Father knows me..* ” Jesus takes his relationship with his disciples and with those that welcome him to the same level of that of the Father has with him. And what is this relationship that the Father has with Jesus? An incessant communication of his spirit of love. And the consequence of this relationship of love “ *..and I lay down my life for the sheep.* ” Once again, Jesus does not give life for a moment of emergency, but it is the normal attitude of the relationship with his own.

And then here there is unfortunately a verse mistranslated that has caused damage in the history of the church. Jesus says “ *..I have other sheep that are not of this fold.* ” from this flock. With Jesus the sheepfolds are finished. A fold certainly gives security, but takes away freedom. Jesus has come to liberate people from all this that takes away freedom.

“ *I must bring them also...* ” the verb *must* means the divine will. Therefore Jesus is the liberator that liberates from any kind of constriction, “ *..they will listen to my voice,* ” Jesus does not impose himself, they are those who feel in the voice of Jesus the answer to their own need for fullness of life, “ *So there will be one flock,..* ” Unfortunately in the past the mistranslation of a fold, only one fold “ *..one shepherd.* ” gave rise to a tragedy in the history of the church because what was the only fold? The Catholic Church had to force people to stay inside and enter and religious wars were created for this translation error. Jesus does not say that it will be one fold, one shepherd, but a flock, so it is the end of the sheep folds. The presence of the flock needs that of a shepherd. Jesus is presenting once again what is the new reality, God’s new dimension. The new temple, the new sanctuary is not the static one of Jerusalem where people have to go, but it is the community that contains the presence of its Lord, a community that is on its way.

Jesus concludes “ *For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again.* ” When there is love without limits there is an illuminated life, “ *No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.* ” One possesses only that which has been given and when one gives, life returns in full. And Jesus concludes “ *I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.* ” life cannot be taken away from those who possess the fullness of life

“ *This charge...* ” it is the first time that the word *charge* appears in John’s gospel, it will appear ten times in relation to Jesus, as opposed to the commandments of Moses “ *I have received from my Father.* ” What is the only charge that Jesus will manifest at the supper? The commandment of love, love without limits. From here we recognize the new sanctuary in which the presence of God is manifested.

