

IV SUNDAY AFTER EASTER– 25th April 2021

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."

In the book of the prophet Ezekiel chapter 34, there is a rebuke from the Lord against the shepherds of his people, why? Because they don't do it for love, they do it for their own sake, they do not protect the sheep, but even exploit them. So the Lord threatens them, "*I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God.*" (verse 15) This is what Jesus refers to in this passage that the liturgy presents to us today; it is John's gospel, chapter 10, 11-18. Jesus states "*I am the good shepherd.*" "*I am*" is the divine name, therefore Jesus claims the fullness of the divine condition; "*The good shepherd*", the term "*good*" does not refer to the goodness of Jesus for which the evangelist will use another word, but to his excellence and quality. Therefore it means "*the true shepherd*". Jesus claims to be the shepherd announced by God in the book of the prophet Ezekiel and therefore this announcement is not that it was long awaited, it was feared because the other 'shepherds' understand that for them it would be the end.

And Jesus is recognized as the true shepherd, because he "...*lays down his life for the sheep.*" This gift of life does not arise from a danger of the sheep, but precedes it; this is the characteristic of Jesus with his 'flock.'

And then Jesus passes on to the mercenaries who are not bad shepherds, they are not bad at all, they are those who do it for interest. So Jesus contrasts the true shepherd who stands out for his generosity, while the others stand out for their convenience; everything they do is for their own convenience.

"*I am the good shepherd.*" repeats Jesus - "*I know my own and my own know me...*" it is a dynamic of love received and love communicated that makes it possible in "*sheep*", which of course is an image of the people, the very transmission of divine life that exists between Jesus and

the Father. In fact Jesus continues “*..just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.*” Again Jesus affirms that he gives his life, again Jesus affirms that the generous gift of his life does not depend on a danger of his own, but even precedes it. This is the constant presence of the Lord within.

Then Jesus announces that “*..I have other sheep that are not of this fold.*” Earlier Jesus had said already that his work as shepherd was to bring the sheep out of the fold, but not to close them in again, but to free them. The fold, if on the one hand protects, on the other, it takes away their freedom; so with Jesus all this ends, the age of the enclosures is over. Then Jesus says “*I must bring them also,..*” the verb ‘must’ indicates the divine will “*.. and they will listen to my voice.*” why do they listen to his voice? Because in the voice of Jesus every man feels the answer to his desire for the fullness of life. “*So there will be one flock, one shepherd.*” the evangelist writes without a conjunction “*...one flock and one shepherd.*” The presence of the flock involves that of a shepherd. The community of Jesus, with the presence of Jesus, is the only true sanctuary from which his love, mercy and compassion takes the place of the temple. But what's the difference? While at the temple it was people who had to go, here there is a flock, a shepherd, so there is a dynamic of movement that goes towards the people, towards all those who need this love, this compassion and this understanding. This is the insignia of Jesus as the true shepherd of his community.