

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, April 26th, 2015

THE GOOD SHEPHERD – Biblical Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM

Jn 10,11-18

Jesus said: "I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. A hired man, who is not a shepherd and whose sheep are not his own, sees a wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf catches and scatters them.

This is because he works for pay and has no concern for the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and I know mine and mine know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I will lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd. This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again. This command I have received from my Father."

The image of Jesus as a Good Shepherd no doubt is the most known and loved one by all Christians, an image which is full of many significances. It is strange though that Jews' leaders feel angry when he defines himself as the Good Shepherd; they call him a fool and will try to stone him. Are we the ones who have understood this image or maybe did the Jews better understand it and then refuse it?

Let's see what John says. Firstly, Jesus introduces himself by claiming the fullness of his divine condition. When Jesus in John's Gospel states "I am", this represents the divine name. When Moses in the famous episode of the burning bush asks to that entity what its name was, God didn't answer giving his name, because a name delimits a reality; he answered by defining an activity which makes him recognizable. He answered "I am who I am". The Hebraic tradition always interpreted this expression, this answer of the Lord as meaning the one who is always close to his people. At the time of Jesus, then, the expression "I am" just indicated God. Therefore Jesus is referring to his divine condition.

He states: "*I am*" – not the Good Shepherd – but "*the Shepherd who is good*". Which is the difference? The evangelist is not talking about the goodness of Jesus; if so, the evangelist would have used the Greek term "agatos" (Agatos), which means "goodness".

Here Jesus, on the contrary, states he is the Shepherd, and uses the Greek word, “kalos”, from which comes the expression ‘calligraphy’, nice handwriting, in order to mean ‘the good’, ‘the true’. So Jesus is not referring to his goodness, but wants to indicate something different, something much more important. What does True Shepherd mean? There’s a prophecy in the Book of Ezekiel, chapt. 34, where the Lord reproaches the leaders of people because, instead of taking care of the flock, they only take care of themselves. So he threatens them *“I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them”*. The Lord will be the only True Shepherd of people. Jesus is stating that the moment has come. That’s why religious leaders are so angry; they feel deprived of power by Jesus who calls them thieves, for they’ve stolen what doesn’t belong to them, the flock.

Then Jesus goes on describing the Shepherd, not the one he considers a bad one, but the one he define as a mercenary. Who is a mercenary? He’s the one who only works for his advantage. The evangelist, let’s remind it, in these pages doesn’t intend to argue with the world of the Jews, from which the Christian community is now definitely separated, but wants to warn the community as not to fail anymore. In a Christian community, then, those who act for their advantage, for their prestige, are defined as ‘mercenaries’ by Jesus; no other titles than mercenaries.

In this passage of this Gospel the expression “I am” is repeated for three times – number three, according to Hebraic symbolism, means what is complete. Jesus claims the fullness of his divine condition and his being Shepherd. Why can he state he’s a Shepherd? Because he is the lamb. Only the one who lays his life for others can be the Shepherd of a flock. Jesus states *“I know mine and mine know me”*. What does this mean? There’s an inmost and growing loving communication between Jesus and his flock, that is between Jesus and his disciples, the believers, which is like the one between himself and the Father.

“Just as the Father knows me and I know the Father”.

There’s a dynamic of love in the one we receive from God, which becomes love conveyed to others. The more this measure of love is growing, the more we achieve the unique reality of a God who doesn’t assimilate the energy of men, but conveys his same energy to them, letting them become the only true temple.

Indeed Jesus will state, *“I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold”*... Jesus came to set people free, what is the fold? A fold is something that gives you confidence, but takes freedom away. Jesus says he came to bring a growing liberation process for mankind which is addressed not only to the enclosure of religion, but to all others situations that limit freedom.

Jesus says: *“I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold”* – he came to set his sheep free from Jew institution – *“These also I must lead”*. The verb ‘must’ is a technical one used by evangelists to indicate the achievement of the divine will. Liberation processes are God’s will. Religion is fascinating because it offers certainties, but takes freedom away. That’s because when you enter religion you just need to

obey, observe, but you remain in a situation of immaturity and infantilism; Jesus wants to drive the individual towards maturity and full growth.

“They will hear my voice”, the voice of the Lord is never imposed, only suggested. How can you recognize the voice of the Lord? While religious authorities, not believing in their same message, have to impose it, Jesus, who perfectly knows that his message is God’s answer to the needs of each individual, only has to offer it and the flock, the believers know this perfectly.

“And there will be one flock, one shepherd”. In the past there was a great error in the translation; a confusion with the word ‘fold’. The verse was then “and there will be one fold, one shepherd”. For this reason, until the Second Vatican Council, it was affirmed that no salvation was possible outside the Catholic Church .

Jesus didn’t come to set people free from the fold of Israel and then lock them up in another one, even more beautiful and more sacred. He came to give them full freedom: One Flock, One Shepherd. What does Jesus mean by this? The only true temple in which the greatness of God ‘s love will be revealed, will be Jesus and his community. In the old temple people were obliged to go but many of them were not allowed to, now it is the same temple that goes and looks for those who have been excluded by religion.