

4th Sunday in Easter

Today, the fourth Sunday of Easter is also known as "Good Shepherd" Sunday. Though most of us in the United States are not directly connected with shepherds by trade, we know about them. The Church uses this metaphor when referring to our bishops and other Church leaders. Jesus is the central "Good Shepherd" who shows us the way to care for God's people. On this day we also celebrate World Day of Prayer for Vocations. The Church invites us to reflect on our individual call to respond to God's voice. Let us take a look at the life of a person who responded to the call to follow the "Good Shepherd" and to be one also—St. Francis.

St. Francis of Assisi is beloved by many Christians and non-Christians in the world today. He is admired as a holy man, a man of prayer and a man of peace. Images of Francis and statues abound. He is often depicted nurturing animals or in ecstasy receiving the wounds of Christ. His life story is well known, however, his early life is rarely a focus of its telling. The beauty of Francis' conversion and the power of God working through him in his later years are more exciting and inspiring aspects of his story. Francis' life in his younger days resembled in some ways that of an American of today. If you remove the technological advances from our day and age you would find that we have much in common with him.

As the son of a successful cloth merchant, he was comfortable in life. He possessed nice clothes, money in his pocket, and friends to spend time with. If he had stayed within the family business it is possible, at the end of his life, people would have thought fondly of him. "A good man," they might have spoken of him after a long life of comfort. God called Francis to be so much more than a comfortable cloth merchant. By answering this call to a different life, God greatly impacted his Church, and the faith of many people through him. At a critical point in his life, Francis heard the call to be something more and answered that call. By God's grace Francis detached himself, let go of his comfortable surroundings, his material comforts, and his family and friends.

Today, Francis is a hero of faith for being able to do so. Francis is a heroic inspiration, because deep down we realize that God calls each of us to be something more. Together all men and women of every vocation – married, single, religious and priest – are being beckoned by God to a depth of discipleship that most likely exceeds what our peers would find as "comfortable." Maybe we hedge our response. We dare not allow ourselves to be challenged to the depth of what God has planned for us. Statues and paintings of the mundane are not often in demand. Rather, we desire inspiring and heroic figures to adorn our walls and rest on our shelves. Would Francis be a standing sentinel in so many gardens around the world today if he had remained a cloth merchant's son? God is calling heroes forth in every vocation today. Especially new shepherds of heroic faith, heroic virtue and heroic zeal are being invited to be so much more than we realize we can be.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday we celebrate World Day of Prayer for Vocations, a day dedicated around the universal Church to pray for an increase in vocations to the religious life and the priesthood. It is also a day to celebrate the call of each baptized Christian including single and married persons. In prayer we often communicate to God our hopes, dreams and aspirations. As in any communication, after we speak, we also listen. If we listen to God's voice in prayer over time, then we can begin to know God's hopes, dreams and aspirations for us.

In daily, dedicated prayer we come to know Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, who increases our self-knowledge and reveals our vocation to us. Pray this day with all your heart. Communicate to God everything that resides within your heart. Then listen with your heart. Listen quietly, peacefully to what stirs within it. "If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts." If today God calls you beyond your comfort zone, then trust He will give you what you need to answer. If, in the future, God calls you to detach from a comfortable way of life, because he has something more for you, then have courage, be confident and answer.

St. John Paul II exhorted us to, "Be not afraid." The Church in every age stands on the shoulders of heroic men and women of every vocation. In light of recent struggles within the priesthood and religious life, God is calling heroes from among us to religious life and the priesthood. He is calling shepherds for His people. God asked Francis to "rebuild my Church." God is calling forth men and women today to help do the same. Pray for young people to hear their vocational call and to courageously answer it. Pray that parents and families will encourage their children to be open to a possible call to the religious life and priesthood. Pray for men and women answering the call, that they may be joyful in answering and have supportive family and friends. Pray for those being called to religious life and priesthood. Pray, like Francis, that they answer the call to be shepherds for us today. If you are being called to something more, answer. Who will be the next Francis if not you?

- Fr. David M. Chiantella