

HOMILY for 4th SUNDAY of EASTER – Year C

This Sunday's Gospel talks about sheep. Reflecting on that, I'm reminded of this cute story that I'd like to share with you.

Henry's new job had him spending a lot of time on the road, & out of concern for his wife's safety, he visited a pet shop to look at watch dogs. "I have just the dog for you," said the salesman, showing him a miniature Pekingese.

"Come on," Henry protested, "that little thing couldn't hurt a flea."

"Ah, but he knows karate," the salesman replied. "Here, let me show you." He pointed to a cardboard box & ordered, "Karate the box!" Immediately the dog shredded it. The salesman then pointed to an old wooden chair & instructed, "Karate the chair!" The dog reduced the chair to matchsticks. Astounded, Henry bought the dog.

When he got home, Henry announced that he had purchased a watchdog, but his wife took one look at the Pekingese & was unimpressed. "That scrawny thing couldn't fight his way out of a paper bag!" she said.

"But, this Pekingese is special," Henry insisted. "He's a karate expert."

"Now I've heard everything," Helen replied. "Karate my foot!"

Anyway, the fourth Sunday of Easter is often called the Good Shepherd Sunday because its Gospel reminds us that Jesus the risen Christ is our Good Shepherd. Sometimes we think of Jesus in terms of the divine nature & godly characteristics. That way of thinking makes Jesus seem to be far away & difficult for us to understand & relate to. That is why this Sunday we're given a new image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Whenever we think about a shepherd, we have in mind someone who would protect & take care of the flock of sheep. It is his duty to defend the sheep & look after them. The survival & wellbeing of the sheep depends on the shepherd. If the shepherd neglects his duty, the sheep would suffer & pay a huge price for it. That is what we seen happening in leadership for our country & Church these days. Leaders of those institutions often claim that they look out for the wellbeing & prosperity of their members. But, we usually see that their members have to make great sacrifices while they do not. We witness this situation happens in our country & Church right now. We watch the poor & the misfortunate suffer terribly in our country & around the world while our powerful leaders would not move a finger to do something about it. We witness Church membership get reduced year after year, but our Church leaders have not done anything to solve that problem yet. Again, the livelihood & future of the sheep depends on their leaders.

This Sunday reminds us that we have a superb model of good leadership in Jesus. Here is how this Sunday's Gospel tells us about His leadership: "...I give them eternal life; & they shall never perish. No one shall snatch them out of my hand." As you can see, Jesus does not only watch out for our current life but also our future. In fact, He has promised to put His life on the line to defend us; & we have seen Jesus keep His words on the Cross. For us Christians, Jesus is the good & compassionate Shepherd, the true leader in this life. It's very hard for us to find a leader like Him in this world. That is why this Sunday's Second Reading gives the following encouragement for future leaders: "...These are the ones who have survived the great period of trial; they have washed their robes & made them white in the blood of the lamb... He who sits on the throne will give them shelter. Never again shall they know hunger or thirst, not shall the sun or its heat beat down on them, for the Lamb on the throne will shepherd them. He will lead

them to springs of life-giving water, & will wipe every tear from their eyes.” That is how good leadership would look like. A good & compassionate leader would help his members avoid hunger & thirst & find safe shelter & life-giving water. He will extend his hand to wipe their tears & lead them through tough trials. That kind of good leadership is what we need in our country & Church these days.

However, a good & compassionate shepherd does not only focus on protecting & taking care of his current sheep/members. He also must try to grow the flock. If he does not, his flock/group would shrink & eventually die off. This reminds me of a true story happened at Grand Rapids Home for Veterans. I was invited to be its Chaplain about three & half decades ago. When I began to work there, the Home had close to eight hundred members. Over the years, we buried lots of its members; sometimes three or four funerals a week. Its staff & members also realized that the leadership of the Home had not done a good job of recruiting new members. They watched the rate of funerals vs. new members & thought that the Home would close up soon. They were absolutely right. The Home went from eight hundred members three & half decades ago to less than one hundred members right now.

Similarly, the Church would have the same problem if it cannot figure out new & creative ways to develop & expand its flock. I have had some friends who have gone back to their home countries in Europe, including Italy, & shared with me that the Churches over there are usually empty & their attendees are mostly elderly. Their relatives who have come over to America for a visit were surprised to see how crowded & young our American churches are. However, due to Covid-19 & the clergy sexual abuse, the Church membership has taken a big hit. Furthermore, the secular culture of our modern time has caused the Church membership to decline rapidly.

Seeing that problem, I have brought this urgent concern to our current bishop & asked him to find ways to engage our youth & grow church membership. Unfortunately, I have received a lukewarm response from him. Now you can see why a good & compassionate shepherd is difficult to find these days. Thankfully, we are able to find it in Jesus & the early Church. In fact, today’s First Reading shares with us how it happened as following: “...Paul & Barnabas spoke out fearlessly: ‘The Word of God has to be declared to you first of all; but since you reject it & thus convict yourselves as unworthy of everlasting life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For thus were we instructed by the Lord: ‘I have made you light to the nations, a means of salvation to the ends of the earth.’” So, Paul & Barnabas evidently realized the urgent need to open up the early Church to the Gentiles & had the courage to take on that mission. Because of their courageous & visionary leadership, the Church has grown beyond the Jewish community & welcomed Gentiles like us. Otherwise, we would not have heard & learned about Jesus the risen Christ. We need courageous & visionary leadership like that to stand up against the inhumane treatment of the poor & immigrants by our country & make America the light to nations, not a dark & isolate place from the world.

My dear brothers & sisters, we are thankful for the good leadership of Jesus & apostles to guide & grow the early Church. As the Cardinals convene in Rome to elect a new leader for the Church, let’s pray for a good & compassionate shepherd to guide it in this challenging time. Let’s also encourage our present church & political leaders to have some care & compassion for their people so that they will always treat everyone with dignity & respect.