

FOURTH WEEK IN EASTERTIDE

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WHAT JESUS GIVES US

A reflection by Abbot Anscar Vonier

“Jesus said, “The sheep who belong to me listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life!” At many places in Scripture the metaphor of a shepherd and flock is used to help us understand vital truths. Its primary meaning has little to do with ruling or our response to someone placed over us. In the classical world kings were sometimes compared with shepherds but that isn’t how Christ uses the metaphor. What a shepherd does primarily is see that sheep get the sort of food, the nourishment, that suits their needs. How does Christ nourish you? That’s the question placed before us.

If we follow Our Lord as sheep follow their shepherd, we will have all we need to grow into eternal life. No one will be able to take us away from Christ unless we deliberately stop following him. Listen once more to today’s Scripture: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them life everlasting and they will never perish because no one can take them away from me. Those the Father has given me overcome everything because the Father is greater than all others and no one can snatch anything out of the Father’s hand! I and the Father are one.” Those who follow Christ show themselves the best and most faithful and most enthusiastic followers anyone ever had. Why?

It is because Christ never disappoints those who follow him! Think of all the merely human leaders who have badly disappointed those who followed them. They have led people astray in all sort of ways. That means they haven’t led them to life, let alone to a new life. Christ always nourishes us with what leads to real and full life, and a life that never ends. The only condition is that we accept what Christ gives us and that we learn to seek nothing more or less than this.

At one point some Jewish leaders confronted Jesus and wanted to know why he wasn’t leading them what they wanted to hear. “It was winter, and the time of the Feast of the Dedication and Jesus was walking in Solomon’s Portico in the Temple area. The Jewish leaders gathered around him and asked: How long are you going to keep us in suspense? If you really are the Messiah, tell us so in plain words!” They wanted a certain kind of Messiah and Jesus wasn’t that kind of leader. That is why he hadn’t told them he was the Messiah that they were seeking. Who do you seek? Do you want a leader who will try to nourish you with what the world around us thinks will satisfy us?

But if we want to know whether Jesus is truly the leader of the people who has been sent by God to lead them to his New Kingdom, his response is that he is. But then he tells us something that is a bit frightening. If we don’t want what Jesus offers us then we aren’t his sheep. We face a stark choice! Is Jesus himself your nourishment? Do you want God as made present to us in Jesus? Then listen to his voice and no other. If you don’t find what you want in Jesus you have to admit you’re looking for a different shepherd. At Easter time we are shown, again and again, what Jesus really offers. He teaches us to want God more than anyone else and to want to love others as Jesus has. That is what is to give us the strength to walk our path of life, day by day.

OUR KINSHIP WITH JESUS

A reflection by St. Cyril of Alexandria

The mark of Christ's sheep is their enthusiasm for listening to him and then following him obediently. The sin of those who are not Christ's is unwillingness to listen and follow where He leads. Those who "hear" God, and so follow God, are known to God. More, to be known and to know God in the way Jesus knows God is to become God's kindred and child. When Jesus says, "*I know mine!*" he is talking about the spiritual-mystical kinship that makes us like him. He leads us to love God about all else, and to love and help one another as Jesus does. By hoping only in God's grace, we become Jesus' kin.

The Son of God has become human, and in that sense all who are human are like him. But those who are like him spiritually and mystically are like him in a deeper way and are even made divine like Him. Yet one has to persevere in this holiness—the dedication first to God and being God's kin. That is what makes us more than just human. "*My sheep follow me!*" That's what Christ says! One no longer looks for life from the Mosaic Law, or a human law, or from the directions and values our world proclaims as the way to life. Rather, one is guided by the Law of Christ, which is the law of love. That is how we come to be called, and to be, children of God. We follow Christ to the Cross, and we follow him in resurrection, and then we follow him in his ascension into heaven.

Christ promises to those who follow him a never-ending life in God's Kingdom. Christ also promises to free us from the many torments the result from seeking life by following someone other than Him. For those who look to other guides everything falls apart; i.e., those others lead us only to corruption and its misery. Christ is by nature life and no one can find true and fulfilled life from anyone but Christ. He doesn't receive life from another but is life in Himself. He doesn't just give a long life but a full life, and one filled with peace and joy.

We look for this when we come to the Eucharist. It is by this seed –by the Eucharistic body and blood—that Christ implants in believers the life of God. "*The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life!*" If you look at the Eucharist without faith that seems a foolish declaration. Clearly, the Eucharist doesn't visibly change the body and spirit of those who receive it in a way that makes them visibly live a life of joy and peace. This sort of change does take place but it comes gradually, as we become more and more like Jesus in his love of the Father and of neighbor. That is something you believe because Christ has said it. Are you following him with your faith? Show by your love that you really are Christ's kin.

WHAT MATTHIAS AS APOSTLE TEACHES US

A reflection developed from a text by Fr. Romano Guardini

What makes one an apostle? It isn't a matter of having special talents, even special spiritual capacities! It isn't a matter of being what is described as "a great religious personality". Personal giftedness, spiritual creativity, dynamic faith and all such things are not the decisive marks of an apostle. People often think of St. Paul or St. John as exceptional individuals in various senses, but that didn't make them apostles. If it were what would we do to make of the fact that Judas was an apostle?

If you consider all these facts in the light of what we know about Matthias it becomes clear that being an apostle is simply a matter of being called. What counts is that Jesus Christ has called and, in some way, placed the seal that is his choice upon a person. *"You have not chosen me but I have chosen you, and I have appointed you to go and bear fruit"*. An apostle is one who is sent by God!

What is an apostle's task? It is to bear witness to Christ. As St. Paul says, it won't be the apostle who speaks through deeds and words but Christ in the apostle. One has to be as much like Christ as possible—otherwise one becomes like Judas. One becomes like Christ by seeking only what Christ seeks. St. Paul makes a clear distinction between Christ's message and his own advice. The Lord's words constrain us to follow them, but an apostle's advice or even commands are only his own and don't *require* following them as we do Christ's.

To be nothing in oneself but everything in Christ, to be obliged to contain such tremendous contents in so small a vessel, to be a constant herald of a life that is not one's own is difficult. Something of the trials such a life involves dawns on us when we read about an apostle's work in the Acts of the Apostles.

Listen to Paul and apply the words to Matthias and to yourself. *"I think God has sent forth us apostles as though doomed to death and as a spectacle to the world, to angels and to humans. We are fools for Christ, we are weak, ...we are without honor, to this very hour we hunger and thirst and are naked and knocked about and have no fixed place to live. We work hard and with our own hands. If bad mouthed we bless those who do it, if we are persecuted, we put up with it. When put down we ask for help gently. Indeed, we are the refuse of the world and its throw-aways, right up to the present."*

Would you want to be an apostle? You would need to love God and Christ far above self to want, let alone fulfill, the requirements of such a call. But, then, you are not asked. You are appointed an apostle. You are chosen even though you did not choose on your own.

The only appropriate response to God's calls is to trust in God and God's grace. That alone can enable one to show the living Christ in one's own living. That is how Christ draws people to himself through you. That is what we are reminded of when we gather to celebrate the choice of Matthias as an apostle. He teaches us what Christ has called each of us to do in a way that matches the life God gives us.

THE MONK'S WAY TO GOD

A reflection from The Instructions of St. Pachomius

My son, turn to God and love him. Flee the enemy and despise him. May the graces of God come your way and may you inherit the blessings of Judah, son of Jacob that your brethren may praise you. Keep away from pride, for it is the beginning of every evil. The beginning of pride is keeping your distance from God and hardening your heart follows this. If the Lord loves you and gives you glory persevere in humility. Blessed is the one who is found watching for that one will enter the kingdom with gladness. The friends of the bridegroom will love him because they have found him keeping watch over his vineyard.

My son, be merciful in all things. Approach God as one who sows and into whose barn God's goods will be gathered. Don't pray for show but give up your whims and do what you do simply for God. If a passion arouses you, whether it is love of money or jealousy or hatred or any other passion, watch out. Fight against these passions. May Jesus fight for you. Do not be fainthearted. Faintheartedness fills you with pretexts for laziness, mistrust and negligence until you are destroyed.

If you are in the desert, do battle by prayers, fasting, and mortification. If you are with people, be wise as a serpent and simple as a dove; if someone curses you put up with it cheerfully, hoping that God will bring about what is best for you. Do not yourself curse the image of God in others. If, on the other hand, someone praises you don't take delight in it but put your hope in the glory of Heaven.

My son, shun the satisfactions of this age so as to be happy in the age to come. Don't be negligent, letting the days pass until you arrive at the door to a dark place and in danger of death. Be sad only when you sin. Scorn vainglory. Vanity is the devil's own weapon. That was how Eve was fooled. No one wrote to her to warn her of this battle before she was tempted but that is why the Word became flesh of the Virgin. You have been warned by the saints who have gone before you. Become guileless like a sheep whose wool is sheared without its saying a thing. Don't go from one place to another thinking you will find God better there than where you are. God has said, "*I fill the earth and the heavens*". Be aware, then, that God is within you. Wherever you are you dwell in God's law and commandments. Look, a thief was on the cross and entered paradise, but Judas was among the apostles and betrayed the Lord. In every place, then, seek out God and at every moment seek God's strength.

My son, as long as you are negligent there will be no progress for you. You stand where God's battle is being fought. Don't fall asleep because the devil lays ambushes. He whispers not to be concerned but if you listen you become weak and without strength. Watch out, then, and keep your promises in mind and don't let the devil cause you to neglect the counsels of the Spirit. You might forget the way to the City of God. Watch yourself, put up cheerfully with one who insults you, be merciful to all and don't fear the sufferings of the flesh. Flee to God, for it is God who created you and suffered for you. He will grant your requests if you carry your cross and follow your Lord.

THE TWO FACES OF CHRISTIAN LIVING

Developed from On the Holy Spirit by St. Basil the Great

In baptism the Lord makes a covenant with us and it has two objectives. Baptism is an image, you see, of both death and life. The water symbolizes death, in that baptism is intended to destroy sin in us in such a way that prevents it from ever dominating us. The Spirit we receive both symbolizes and realizes life and enables us to live in a way that gives birth to holiness and so eternal life with God. The Spirit awakens our spirits to the life they were given in creation. That is why baptism is spoken of as a second birth and a being born-again.

The killing of sin in us begins when we are enlightened by receiving a knowledge of God which so captures our love as to leave no place in us for an attraction to any sin. Baptism is administered by a triple immersion that accompanies the invocation of Father, Son and Holy Spirit and creates in us an image of trinitarian life as a life of divinizing love. Scripture tells us that baptism *“isn’t a cleansing of the body but a pledge made to God from a clear conscience”*. The pledge comes from our complete gift of self to God in love and the clear conscience is realized in our not acting from self-interest in doing this.

Our Lord tells us in the Gospels how to prepare ourselves for the life of God’s Kingdom. He tells us to do this by the way we live now. We are to live peaceably, in long-suffering, undefiled by pleasure-seeking, and detached from the goods of this world, especially from its so-called wealth. To freely choose to live in this way prepares us for the way of life that will be natural in the world to come.

In effect, by receiving the Holy Spirit we are restored to paradise, we are reinstated as children of God and begin to ascend to Heaven and its Kingdom. We gain the right to call God “Our Father” and become sharers in the grace of Christ. We are offered every sort of blessing. Our enlightenment enables us to see that what doesn’t draw us toward God or help us live as Jesus lived is not a genuine blessing. We can then contemplate the real blessings, if only as in a mirror. Our faith tells us of many of the good things that will be given us one day, and it stimulates us to imagine what marvelous gifts life with God will include by starting from what is already promised and pledged. If the first fruits are so wonderful what will the full harvest be?

The key to all this is our response to Jesus and the gift of the Spirit. If we actually give ourselves fully to striving to live as God lives, then sin has lost its hold on us. We simply have to refuse to fall back into old ways of thinking and hoping. This is not difficult if we cling to the Spirit and its promises. We know in this way that there is nothing in the world that is as good as what God has in store for us. Keep your mind fixed on “things above” and you will never be drawn into things that imprison us in this world’s ways and hopes. Where our hopes are, our deepest and most deeply felt hopes, that is where our hearts are. If your hearts are with God there is no place within you where sin is welcome.

THE TRIPLE BIRTH GOD GIVES US

Developed from Against Eunomius by St. Gregory of Nyssa

Christ, we are told, is three realities, “*the first born of all creation, the firstborn of many brothers and sisters, the firstborn from the dead*”. We too have to be born three times before we really come fully to life. Our first birth is physical, our second is sacramental and spiritual, and our third is in the resurrection and God’s Kingdom. Only in this triple way can the fear of death be destroyed, can the descent of the Spirit fill us with a spiritual life that transforms us even physically, and can that transformation be made complete and everlasting in the resurrection to life.

Perhaps this is symbolized by the fact that Jesus was born of a virgin, something which is impossible in the order of nature as it was first created. This is a sign that all is being re-created and made new by Christ. We know, then, that we were created when God created the world, and we know that this first creation was spoiled by disobedience. That is what has to be destroyed so a new world, founded on free obedience, can be created through Christ.

St. Paul spells this out beautifully: “*You have stripped off your old self with its way of acting and its desires; you now must put on a new self that has been created in the image of God in Christ.*” The old self sought its happiness and fulfillment in things which God had declared incapable of giving us these gifts. The old self was founded in the sin that is disobedience. Re-creation involves establishing free obedience to God as the foundation of a way of life that does lead us to all the true goods we can desire. That obedience is shown us in Christ—in all that Jesus did from his remaining in the Temple to be near the Father to his acceptance of the Father’s will in the Garden.

Listen to St. Paul again: “*If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation; the old creation is gone and now all is new*”. God made human nature in the first place and has now made it anew. We see what this new creation is when we turn to Christ and began to understand what a marvelous life he lived and what a holy death he died. Everything that God called good and holy, even death, Jesus called good and holy. We are to do the same.

In the beginning God made flesh. Later he made himself flesh. He shared our flesh and blood in order to clothe us with the Spirit. He is thus called the “firstborn” of this new creation of which God himself is also the origin. He then became the “firstborn” and the first fruits of those born to eternal life through the new creation as fulfilled perfectly in resurrection. We are called to a life of obedience and so a life of divine love and are called though the Spirit given us in Christ. This new life transforms us only gradually. Our obedience begins as acceptance of the daily struggle to become more like Christ and to obey and love as he does.

TREMBLING AT GOD'S WORDS

Developed from St. Ambrose' Commentary on Psalm 118

Though princes may persecute me without cause, my heart trembles at your words. This paraphrases what we pray over and over again as we pray the psalms. Think of the implications! Earthly powers and rules may ask of us things which God's law forbids. The powers of darkness seek to subjugate our minds and hearts from within by disordered thoughts and longing. These two sorts of powers may promise you all the wonders that the world contains, and honors and wealth and pleasures in addition. But we struggle not to let ourselves become weak-minded enough to give in. We refuse to obey them.

Sometimes the result is persecution. This may be done without just cause, even from a worldly point of view. Sometime they are trying to victimize a person on whose obedience they have no legal claim. Sometime they merely torment persons handed over to their power. Sometimes they subjugate people because they are pursuing world gain with all their heart. Sometime they are punishing people who have broken valid earthly laws.

Imagine the phrase I began with in the mouth of a martyr. The torments such a person may suffer are undeserved. The martyr hasn't committed a crime—hasn't robbed or killed anyone—and yet is tormented for doing what is right, especially if this means behaving like a true Christian. The penalty of death is more than most common murders are subject to. Though such a one may speak the truth no one will listen.

Why are such people ignored? Fundamentally, because theirs is a message about salvation. "*When I spoke to them of peace, I was subjected to unwarranted assault*". That's what we are reminded of by the psalm. In reaction to a lived testimony deserving nothing but praise, such a person is hounded like a dangerous criminal. For glorying in the name of the Lord, such a person is falsely accused. How, then, should we, who haven't been called upon to suffer in this way, live in a Christ-like way? We should live fearing only that we may offend our Lord.

The love of God is the foundation of all human goodness. We know this even if many will not admit its truth. Truly, one persecuted for doing this is punished without cause. That is precisely why the psalmist proclaims: "*my heart trembles at your words*", at the words of the Lord more than those of any earthly power or authority. In that case one trembles lest the truth be offended and evil be done. One doesn't tremble because of foreseen persecution or torment or revilement. "*Happy are those who fear the Lord!*" Why? It is because they "*delight in keeping the Lord's commandments*". That is what the Lord asks of us.