

Sunday Message

THE WORD

Year A • Psalter Week 4

SAFETY IN NUMBERS?

(JOHN 10:1-10)



During these Sundays of Easter, the first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles, describes the life and mission of the early Christian community. The extracts from the Gospel of John concentrate on the relationship of the individual disciple to Jesus.

In the image of the sheepfold, we can imagine more than one flock of sheep together. The animals do not have distinct markings, but this does not matter, as the way in which the particular shepherd gathers his own is to call them by name: the individual sheep recognises the voice of its own shepherd and comes obediently to him. The shepherd then walks off and the sheep follow trustfully: no need for dogs or whistles.

Jesus also describes himself as the gate of the sheepfold. Sometimes there was no gate or door to keep the sheep safe, so the shepherd would lie down across the opening and the shepherd's body would then become the barrier to protect the flock from predators. But Jesus is more than that. He is offering ultimate safety, which we call salvation, pasture which the prophets declared the messianic shepherd would provide, and finally abundant life. Jesus is also making a contrast between himself and the leaders of the people who have failed in their responsibilities to care properly for those entrusted to them. ■

REFLECT

This passage is leading up to Jesus' describing himself as the good shepherd, the model for all those who are given a position of authority in the community. He will act out dramatically what this entails when he washes the feet of his disciples to teach them that authority manifests itself in humble service. The ultimate expression of this dedication to others is to lay down one's life for them: we can see this most clearly in the likes of Archbishop Oscar Romero who followed the example of Jesus in caring for his people to the extent of literally giving his life for them.

We might think today about our relationship with the risen Jesus. We consider in this Easter season that he entered into glory by way of the cross, so the gratitude which we feel is an important part of our attitude towards Jesus. It is, in some ways, easier and less demanding to think of ourselves as one of the flock, one of the crowd, and that Jesus gave his life for a vast and anonymous group. But John the evangelist does not let us off so lightly. In the Gospel today, Jesus is presented as calling his own sheep out of the amalgamated flocks one by one. He knows and can recognise each member of his own flock. Each one must respond: each one must follow. To cultivate a personal relationship with Jesus rather than simply be a member of the congregation is a challenge which some of us might rather not face; but the proper relationship of the disciple with Jesus, according to the Fourth Gospel is love: no one

LEARN

A sheepfold would be formed of a circular stone wall with an opening: it would have thorny branches on the top to deter, predatory animals.

Shepherds in the area would bring their flocks to a common sheepfold for safety at night and put them in together.

Smaller, more remote sheepfolds would have no gate or attendant: the shepherd would lie down across the opening to keep the sheep in and predators out.

DO

Look at the congregation at Mass: do you find it easier to imagine yourself as just one of the crowd or as a guest invited personally to a celebration? Remember that Jesus, the good shepherd, knows your name.



SAY

The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want (Psalms 23:1)