

## Homily– May 3 – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter – Partners in Ministry Liturgy

In my book of Liturgical readings there is a photo of a stone sculpture showing Jesus as the Good Shepherd. He is holding a small lamb and caressing it against his cheek in an extremely tender gesture.

Here is a picture of the dedicated shepherd – the leader of his flock – ready to sacrifice all for them. In today's reading from John's gospel, Jesus proclaims: "*I am the Good Shepherd.*" – the *true* shepherd – the *model* shepherd. He sets up a contrast between how *he* is in this role with the person who acts as the "hired hand." This person does *not* care deeply, she or he does *not* take responsibility for the mission for which they have been chosen, *does a quick exit* when things get tough.

Jesus, on the other hand, presents himself as the strong, steadfast Guide. He is to us the true Christian leader, modeling qualities he calls us to imitate.

This image of the Good Shepherd as leader brings to mind the love that Elizabeth Seton had for Psalm 23 – "The Lord is my Shepherd, . . ." Here the shepherd is described as diligent, tender, strong, patient – a true friend. The shepherd provides guardian care, security, abundance, protection from evil, strength to walk in the way of the Lord.

Elizabeth relished this promise of God's love. In one of her reflections she wrote: ". . . do I realize it – *the protecting presence, the consoling grace of my Redeemer and God.* . . . He is my *guide*, my *friend* and *Supporter* – with such a *guide* can I fear, with such a friend shall I not *be satisfied*, with such a supporter can I fall –" [*Collected Writings* 1: 32]

This description from Psalm 23 fits what Jesus says of himself: "*I know mine and they know me*" – I *care for* my followers. They recognize my voice and are willing to respond with total confidence in me. A mutual knowledge of each other, a mutual trust exists. If we are disciples of Jesus, we listen for his call – we hear it, and we follow. He calls us also to be people who care for, protect, and guide others along their life's journeys. He call us to lead them to him.

Besides this deep caring, Jesus also assures us of his willingness to take risks, to give his all for our sakes – unlike the hired hand who turns his back or runs away at the first sign of danger or challenge – who is so "disengaged" that we don't recognize his voice. Jesus is willing and does lay down his life for us – He sacrifices *all* on Calvary. In doing this he becomes the model for what he is asking of us, his disciples, as he invites us to follow him – to learn from his example – to emulate his devotion to us. He freely gave his life, John's gospel tells us – "no one took it from him." – He laid it down "of his own accord" – *freely* out of love for us.

How does this play out in the Christian story? In the second reading from the *Acts of the Apostles* we hear of Peter and John speaking to the people about Jesus' resurrection. They know they are taking a risk doing this – and sure enough, they are arrested and brought before the Jewish rulers who were "extremely annoyed at their teaching." They are questioned: "By what power or by whose name have you done this?" *Filled with the Holy Spirit*, as Jesus promised, they boldly respond: "By the name of Jesus of Nazareth whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead."

All of us are expected to follow our call of Christian discipleship as Jesus spelled out and as his disciples and loyal followers have demonstrated through the centuries. Today we come together to celebrate St. Elizabeth Seton's founding of the American Sisters of Charity. She, her companions in religious life, and their co-workers across the years and around the world have striven to be faithful followers – and leaders. In 1814 when the Sisters were asked to open their first mission in Philadelphia, advisors cautioned them of the dangerous and disagreeable conditions they would encounter if they accepted this mission since war was being waged with Britain along the Atlantic coast. Nevertheless, Elizabeth and her council "unanimously decided that no personal inconvenience should prevent Sisters of Charity doing what duty and charity required." When the Sisters arrived in Philadelphia, they were welcomed by the parish priest and assisted by a board of lay managers as well as by local women who were regarded as "true Mothers of

Charity towards the orphans and the Sisters," both for their financial support and by their physical assistance.

These "partners in ministry" are the precursors" of all of you who are celebrating with us today. We are *all* invited to participate in Jesus' mission. We are *all inspirited* by the Love he models for us to offer it to others.

Elizabeth Seton was thus inspirited when she wrote: "We sanctify ourselves for others. . . . Our name [of Christian] devotes us to their service in any manner that we could truly serve them. . . . We must display for them the tender compassion of God's goodness, be the ministers of God's providence for the relief of their miseries, a relief which disposes so well every heart to God's better service." [Dirvin, *Soul of Elizabeth Seton*, 129-30]

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