

Acts 4 vv5-12

Psalm 23

1 John 3 vv 16-21

John 10 vv 11-18

## Following the Shepherd

Sheep, they tell me, are not particularly bright animals. They can't fend for themselves very well. Food and water may be within sight, but they won't go to it unless a shepherd leads them. Sheep get lost easily too, so they need a shepherd to guide them. Sheep can't defend themselves. They have no sharp claws or teeth or wings to fly. Sheep are an easy target for an enemy - unless they have a shepherd to protect them.

It's not much of a compliment when Jesus calls us his sheep. The term wasn't designed to exalt us; it was designed to exalt our shepherd.

In our readings today we have more than 1 reference to this theme. In Psalm 23, the psalmist acknowledges that the Lord is his shepherd and that the shepherd will provide for him, accompany him in times of stress and danger and protect him both physically and spiritually.

In John 10, Jesus uses the scene of a shepherd enclosing his sheep in a sheepfold to give us one of the most moving pictures of our salvation and assurance in Christ found anywhere in the Bible. If you've ever doubted the love of Christ, Jesus will give you a healthy dose of confidence.

This is by no means a modern idea, writing around 600 AD, Pope Gregory the Great wrote

Let us reflect upon how these words of our Lord imply a test of our own. Ask yourselves first if you are indeed the sheep of Jesus; and secondly, if you know him and recognise the light of truth. We recognise truth not simply by faith but by love. You recognise truth not by the assent of the intellect, but by the love you express in your deeds. As the apostle John says; 'Those who say that they love God, but disobey his commandments, are liars'

Jesus goes on to add the following words; 'My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me, and I will give them eternal life.' A little earlier he said also 'If any enter by me, they will be saved, and will go out and find pasture' That is to say, they will go in by faith, and go out from faith to vision, from belief to contemplation, and will find pasture in the eternal banquet God has prepared.

The Lord's sheep will find the Lord's pastures. Those who follow Christ with an undivided heart will be nourished in pastures that are forever green. And what are such pastures if not the most profound joy of feeding in the everlasting fields of paradise? For the pasture of the saints is to see God face to face. When the vision of God never fades, the soul is filled with an abundance of food for eternal life.

And so, let us seek those pastures and join with the throng of the citizens of heaven. Let their happiness and celebration be an invitation to us. Let our hearts grow warm; let our faith be rekindled; let our desire for the things of heaven increase; for to love in this way is indeed to be on the way

We should allow no misfortune to distract us from this happiness and deep joy; For if you are determined to reach the destination of your spiritual journey the roughness of the road will not deter you.

Nor should the delights of material prosperity in this life ever entice you astray; only the foolish traveller, spotting a pleasant field on the way, forgets that he is en route to a greater destination.

And, finally, to return briefly to 2 verses from our Gospel reading for today

I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd giveth his life for his sheep

I lay down my life so that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself.

This is what our Shepherd has done for us - can we behave like the sheep we are and follow where He leads