

## **April 21 IV Sunday of Easter**

On the Fourth Sunday of Easter, called Good Shepherd Sunday, we continue to reflect on the meaning of the Resurrection. This is also the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. Today, we celebrate the risen Lord as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. The priest in charge of a parish is called pastor because “pastor” means shepherd. As shepherd, he leads, feeds, nurtures, comforts, corrects, and protects Christ’s sheep, the people of the parish. The earliest Christians saw Jesus as the fulfillment of the ancient Jewish dream of a Good Shepherd. They also wished to include the Gentiles as part of God’s flock.

In today’s first reading, Peter asserts unequivocally before the Jewish assembly that there is no salvation except through Christ, the Good Shepherd — the one whom the Jewish leaders have rejected and crucified and in whose name the apostles preach and heal.

In the second reading, St. John tells us how Yahweh, the Good Shepherd of the Old Testament, expressed His love for us through His Son Jesus, the Good Shepherd, by making us His children. In today’s Gospel Jesus introduces himself as the “Good Shepherd.” Jesus claims that as Good Shepherd he knows his sheep and loves them so much he is ready to die for them.

The Gospel text offers us both comfort — the Good Shepherd knows us, provides for us, and loves us — and a double challenge: to become good shepherds to those entrusted to our care and good sheep in our parish, the sheepfold of Jesus the Good Shepherd.

Introducing himself as the Good Shepherd of his flock, Jesus makes five claims in today’s Gospel:

- 1) He knows his sheep and his sheep hear his voice: Just as the Palestinian shepherds knew each sheep of their flock by name, and each sheep knew its shepherd and his voice, so Jesus knows each one of us, our needs, our merits, and our faults
- 2) He gives eternal life to his sheep by receiving us into his sheepfold through Baptism. Jesus also strengthens our Faith by giving us the Holy Spirit in Confirmation, supplies food for our souls in the Holy Eucharist and the Divine words of the Holy Bible, and he makes our society holy by the Sacraments of Matrimony and the Priesthood.
- 3) He protects his sheep by placing them in the loving hands of his Almighty Father. Without Him to guide us and protect us, we are easy prey for the spiritual wolves of this world.
- 4) He goes in search of his stray lambs and heals his sick ones. In the first part of chapter ten of John’s Gospel, Jesus adds two more roles to the work of the good shepherd. Jesus heals the wounds of our souls by the Sacrament of Reconciliation and strengthens us in illness and old age by the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.

5) Jesus dies for his sheep: Just as the shepherds of ancient days protected their sheep from wild animals and thieves by risking their own lives and even dying, so Jesus suffered and died in expiation for the sins of all people.

Messages:

1) Let us become good shepherds: Everyone who is entrusted with the care of others is a shepherd. Hence Bishops, pastors, parents, teachers, doctors, nurses, government officials, bosses, and politicians are all shepherds. We become good shepherds by loving those entrusted to us, praying for them, spending our time, talents, health, and wealth for their welfare, and guarding them from physical and spiritual dangers. Parents must be especially careful of their duties as shepherds, becoming role models for their children by leading exemplary lives.

2) Let us be good sheep in the fold of Jesus, our Good Shepherd: a) by hearing and following the voice of our shepherds through their homilies, Bible classes, counseling and advice; b) by taking the spiritual food given by our pastors through regular and active participation in the Holy Mass and by frequenting the sacraments, prayer services, renewal programs, and missions; c) by cooperating with our pastors, giving them positive suggestions for the welfare of the parish, encouraging them in their ministry by prayer and presence, by offering them praise and thanks for all they are doing for us, and occasionally by making constructive suggestions for changes; d) by cooperating as good stewards in the activities of various councils, ministries, and parish associations.

3) Let us pray that we may all both receive and accept God's offered vocations to the Priesthood, the diaconate and the consecrated life as well as to Marriage and the single state, so that we may have more holy and Spirit-filled shepherds to lead, feed, and protect a receptive Catholic community.

Christ Jesus is the Priest in the full sense because He is the one mediator between God and humanity who offered Himself, a unique sacrifice, on the cross. The universal priesthood of all believers, the sharing of all the baptized in the priesthood of Christ, has received special emphasis since Vatican II. Those who are called to make a lifelong commitment to serve as ordained ministers share the ministerial priesthood of Jesus. On this World Day of Prayer for Vocations we are asked to encourage and pray for our young men to respond to God's call to serve His Church in the ministerial priesthood and for all of us that we may live out our vocations as He wills.