

Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year B – Good Shepherd Sunday
(21 & 22/4/18)

“I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd is one who lays down his life for his sheep.” Where are the men, young and maybe not so young, who are going to stand up and follow the call of Christ to serve as priests in His Church? Christ doesn’t cease to call. Those vocations are out there. It just requires much prayer for those who think they might be called to the priesthood to make that journey to the priesthood, just as young saplings require regular watering to grow into great trees.

The priesthood is a great gift to us from Christ. Christ is the good shepherd, and through the sacrament of holy orders, he enables men to share in his work of shepherding the flock. But spot that within the same sentence, He adds, “the good shepherd is one who lays down his life for his sheep”. Being a priest involves personal sacrifice. In many secular professions, you give over part of your life, do a job, and then when you go home, your life is your own. But not with the priesthood. When you become a priest, you give your whole life over to God. You place yourself completely in God’s hands. You take a promise of celibacy, and also a promise of respect and obedience to your bishop. It’s no longer up to you what sort of house you have, or where you live, or what you do. You are sent, and go wherever the mission of Christ requires you. And that can be a little bit daunting. As I was coming up to the end of my time in my previous parish, I knew that I could be literally sent to pretty much any of the parishes in the Archdiocese, and/or I could be made a chaplain to perhaps the RAF, or the prison service, or even the diocesan youth service. I had to say to the Lord that, no matter what my fears about the future might be, that I placed myself into His hands and would go wherever He sent me. He was good. He sent me to Hanley and gave me the hospital to look after. I’ve always loved getting a good night’s sleep, but I know that that isn’t always possible now, because other people’s needs can be greater. I can catch up on sleep later on. St John Paul II used to warn young people about the dangers of selfishness, and used to say that to be full of hope and joy, you have to give of yourself to others. That is what the priesthood is about. Christ freely laid down His life, and freely took it up again, and what a difference His sacrifice made. People sometimes say, “no pain, no gain”. He went through a lot of pain, and gained so more than just the whole world. He was so transformed and glorified in His Resurrection, and He wants to pass that onto us, if we will let Him.

So in the first reading we see the effects of this, with Peter, as another Christ, fearlessly preaching a message that not everyone wants to hear today: “For of all the names in the world given to men, this is the only one by which we can be

saved”. The truth is not always popular, but it is always true. And so, in the psalm, the response could have been written for today. “The stone which the builders rejected has become the corner stone.” Christ, the stone which so many of the builders of our society have rejected, is the most important of all, and it’s why the buildings they are making are all falling down. The foundations are no good, because they are lacking Christ. It is the calling of a priest to be a prophet, and perhaps a doctor too, to diagnose the cause of the symptoms and to propose the cure, even if sometimes people are afraid to take the medicine.

In the second reading it says, “Because the world refused to acknowledge him, therefore it does not acknowledge us”. It’s not our mission to gain the acclaim of the world. Christ in fact said, “Alas for you when the world speaks well of you! This was the way their ancestors treated the false prophets.” (Luke 6:26) Following a calling to the priesthood can involve misunderstanding and ridicule, and sometimes even from Catholics. We have the strange phenomenon of Catholics who discourage Catholics from pursuing a vocation to the priesthood. “Are you really sure? Perhaps when you’re a little older you might change your mind.” I was quite impressed when a seminarian told me that he had turned teenage rebellion on his head and re-used phrases so many others have used in rejection of God. His mother didn’t want him to train for the priesthood, so he basically said to her that it’s his life, not hers, and that she can’t control his life.

We need men who are ablaze with love of God and zeal for the salvation of souls. Look at this from 1 Samuel 17:34, where David is speaking to King Saul: “When your servant grazed the sheep of his father, if a lion or a bear removed a single one of these sheep, I followed and struck down the beast and tore the sheep from its jaws.” We need workers to go out into the world and bring back the lost sheep and make converts. That’s a job for everyone, but it needs especially the leadership and example of a priest. We do not need shepherds that are what Scripture calls “dumb dogs” that are afraid to bark! Perhaps there might be one or two people listening to this who think they could do a better job than me. Maybe you can. If so, do not be afraid to respond to your calling.

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