

4th SUNDAY OF EASTER

We all probably have our favourite image of Jesus, either from film or art; perhaps in a prayer book or illustrated Bible. It would not surprise me if, by taking a show of hands, the most popular image of Jesus is that of the Good Shepherd – *Pastor bonum*. The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd – of the man carrying a sheep on his shoulders - is doubtless the most ancient in Christian art; and the liturgy of this Sunday centres around this image. The early Church had a special affection for the image of the Good Shepherd and have left us countless testimonies of it in the Catacombs as well as on many ancient buildings, murals, reliefs, mosaics and sculptures. It is reminiscent also of the parable of the Lost Sheep, where the shepherd leaves the flock and goes out to seek the one who is lost.

Today is Vocations or Good Shepherd Sunday. Why? Because today the Church throughout the world prays for the various vocations, particularly vocations to the priesthood, after the patten of the good Shepherd. I have been given some prayer cards from the Vocations department in the diocese, and I would like you to take them away and use them in your prayers. Each day this week we shall have as our mass intention some aspect of vocation within the people of God.

Pope Francis' message for this Vocations Sunday includes the words:

“All of us are called to share in Christ’s mission to reunite a fragmented humanity and to reconcile it with God. Each man and woman, even before encountering Christ and embracing the Christian faith, receives with the gift of life a fundamental calling: each of us is a creature willed and loved by God; each of us has a unique and special place in the mind of God”.

The various expressions of the Christian life demonstrate just how God's love can be shared in our world, and shown to those who have little or no knowledge of God. Pope Francis continues:

"In the vocation to the ordained priesthood, to be instruments of Christ's grace and mercy. In the vocation to the consecrated life, to be the praise of God and the prophecy of a new humanity. In the vocation to marriage, to be mutual gift and givers and teachers of life. In every ecclesial vocation and ministry that calls us to see others and the world through God's eyes, to serve goodness and to spread love with our works and words".

Returning to the image of the Good Shepherd: there is a twist to this, as each of us are called to be sheep who listen to the voice of the shepherd. If we wish to be identified with Jesus in our baptism and confirmation, then we need to be faithful sheep of the One fold of Christ. St Peter wrote of the Christians in Rome, "For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls". We cannot be faithful to the Good Shepherd if we do not live as God desires for us; if we teach a faith which the Church does not teach; We cannot be faithful to the Good Shepherd if we do not at least attempt to love and serve others in the way our Lord showed us in His life.

Vocations Sunday is a renewed call to holiness and Christian service: to be like Christ in the small and ordinary tasks of life, that God may transform them into something extraordinary. How is the Lord calling you to be extraordinary in your life today?