



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
**in the City of New York**  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
**[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**Sunday, May 3, 2020**  
*The Fourth Sunday of Easter*

*Solemn Eucharist*  
*at 11:00 a.m.*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*  
*on*  
Acts 2:42-47, 1 Peter 2:19-25, and John 10:1-10  
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**You are not alone: Listen for the voice of the Shepherd.**

One of the activities that the Sunday School children have engaged in these past few weeks is to create art work that can be sent to house-bound parishioners, especially the frail elderly or the chronically sick during this time of pandemic. The children have drawn beautiful pictures of flowers, of animals, and even ice-cream by way of encouragement. But the other week, we were all moved by two children who had added some words to their art-work, "*You are not alone.*"

In the early days of the Christian Church, Jesus was not depicted in art but, rather, in symbolic ways; the fish, the anchor, the Greek letters Chi-Rho (later to become the Labarum or military standard of the Emperor Constantine), symbolic birds such as the peacock or the dove; or a ship sailing on the sea. It wasn't until the 3<sup>rd</sup> century that figurative art was used and some of the earliest can be found in the Catacombs of Priscilla in Rome where Christians were buried from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> centuries.

That particular catacomb has, probably, the earliest depiction of the Blessed Virgin holding the Christ Child. There are scenes from the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament – Abraham and Isaac; Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace; the feeding of the five thousand mixed with the breaking of the bread; and, most significantly, a woman with her hands raised in the position of prayer and looking up to an image of the Good Shepherd. There, in typical Roman and Greek form, we see a young man, beardless and strong. He is the Shepherd but not of sheep, rather, he carries a goat on his shoulders and has two more close-by. It is as if he is saying to all buried there, "*You are not alone.*"

At one time, before the grave robbers came, there were over 40,000 bodies in this particular catacomb provided by a wealthy Christian woman underneath her home. Here, the early Christians laid their dead alongside the martyrs and near to an image of the Good Shepherd; rich and poor, young and old, they shared the same space in death as they had attempted to do in life. The infant Church was truly a community of believers – a family. As we heard in our first reading, "*All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.*"

As people shared the good news, the Gospel, they attempted to model their lives on Jesus Christ. As Peter said in our epistle reading, "*Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.*" His example had been counter-cultural. He called those who studied the Law but did not put it into practice hypocrites, and set a child before his followers as the example of greatness. He took off his outer garment and washed the disciples' feet. He told a parable about a prodigal son, and he told the repentant thief on the

cross that he would be with him in paradise. In today's Gospel reading, he does not lord it over his disciples or even the Pharisees who in the chapter nine were attacking him, instead, he favors the example of the shepherd.

In the Hebrew Scriptures there are many examples of good and bad shepherds and also of hired hands who care nothing for the sheep. We should expect this; the tribes of Israel had been nomads – they spent 40 years in the wilderness after the Exodus. Flocks of sheep were simply part of their identity. But, more than that, the greatest king who was to become a potent symbol of the Messiah who would bring redemption was David, the *shepherd boy King*, who was not even in the house when the priest Samuel came to anoint him because he was looking after the sheep.

As Chapter 10 of John's Gospel unfolds, we discover the difference between the hired man who is simply doing a job and the shepherd whose voice is known to the sheep because he has a relationship with them.

In the parable at the beginning of the chapter, Jesus describes himself as the gate. If Jesus is the gate, that means that we have to pass through him. It is a metaphor for the baptismal covenant when we 'put on Christ' (cf. Romans 13:14) and become a new creation in him and, thereafter, live our lives modelled on him. It is tempting to think that gates are designed to keep people out but if Jesus is the gate, then it is a gate that opens to all who wish to become part of the flock. Jesus gives an example of a sheepfold where the sheep are so safe and confident that they can come and go at will in order to find rich pasture. And the flock is growing and wonderfully diverse; *"I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice,"* says Jesus. How significant that the early depiction of the Good Shepherd in the catacombs has goats rather than sheep!

Jesus goes on to say, *"The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."* Now, there are two ways, I think, of understanding this; both are beautiful images, and both are powerful signs of the relationship that Jesus has with the church. In the parable we heard, Jesus talked about the gatekeeper and the gate which was to keep out thieves and bandits but to allow the flock in and out. There is a tradition still practiced in many parts of the world, especially during the lambing season, that a shepherd sleeps with the flock so that he or she can be on hand night and day to protect or to help the sheep, particularly if they are struggling to give birth. It was the case in New Testament times that the Shepherd would even sleep across the gate to put himself between the flock and harm's way: Jesus as the shepherd of the gate will protect the flock.

The second way of understanding the Good Shepherd laying down his life for his sheep is almost shocking for, rather than seeing the sheep as a commodity, the Good Shepherd is prepared to die in order for the sheep to live. Jesus does this freely in order to bring a new kind of living; *"I lay down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father,"* he says.

And the Good Shepherd sets before us the consequences of this kind of humility and self-sacrifice; Jesus said, **"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."**

My dear friends, we are seeing so many examples of this kind of abundant living in spite of this pandemic and lock-down; as a parish we have never been so interconnected with people across the world reaching out to one another; parishioners obtaining personal protective equipment for hospitals and those on the front line; parishioners helping to re-open homeless shelters safely; parishioners supplying groceries or meals to those who need them. As I have said before, things may never be the same again, but each week I see examples of people listening to the voice of the Good Shepherd. If we listen to that voice, he will draw us together that, in spite of our many differences, no – *enriched* by our many differences, we will truly become one flock under his care and we shall live abundantly in his love.

Some words of Rowan Williams:

*“When the Church of God begins to come together, it is a sign that we have stopped listening to strangers and have begun to turn to the one we most deeply recognize as the one who alone can bring us in to the presence of the true God, where there is real nourishment to be found.”<sup>1</sup>*

Or, as a younger member of our flock said to one of our seniors, *“You are not alone.”*

<sup>1</sup> Sermon preached at All Saints Cathedral, Nagpur - CNI 40th Anniversary Celebration Service, Thursday 14th October 2010