

## The Good Shepherd and *His* Sheep

Last Sunday the Church gave us an excerpt from the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel John where our Lord explains Himself, us, and the relation between the two in terms of sheep and a shepherd. Our Lord speaks of “*My* sheep” in this passage. St Augustine takes up the question of: who does our Lord mean by “*My* sheep?” He considers the example of both Judas Iscariot and St Paul. Judas started out with the Lord but then left Him. Is Judas one of His sheep, Augustine asks? Paul (Saul) started out as one of the most vicious persecutors of our Lord’s Church but then became one of His greatest promoters. Is Paul one of the Lord’s sheep? St Augustine concludes that when our Lord says “*My* sheep” He is referring to those who get Heaven.

What are the characteristics of our Lord’s “sheep,” those who get to Heaven? When our Lord created sheep and gave them particular characteristics, He knew at that moment that He would use this analogy of sheep and shepherd to teach us. It’s perhaps not surprising, then, that He gave them certain traits that would be useful for teaching. This article will consider those characteristics as provided, not by religious sources (Scripture scholars, saints, doctors of the Church) but rather by secular, “scientific” resources, one of which was published, for example, by Iowa State University Press.

1. Sheep have excellent hearing. Our Lord’s sheep, those who get to Heaven, have excellent hearing which means that they really listen to what He has taught – not just some casual hearing, not just staring off into space as the readings are read in Mass, but they really take it in, ponder it, turn it over in their minds, they take it as a matter of life and death (since it is), they strive to really understand what it is the Shepherd is teaching, they strive to know the Shepherd. They hear by taking time each day to silence themselves and really raise their mind to the Shepherd (prayer), putting all else out of their mind. According to these scientific sources, sheep not only have excellent hearing but will also come to know their shepherd’s voice and face, if they spend enough time with the shepherd. Having excellent hearing, being able to recognize the Good Shepherd – these are characteristics of His sheep, those who get to Heaven.

2. Sheep have good peripheral vision but poor depth perception. This one really comes to the heart of the matter, especially in regard to the relation between sheep and shepherd. How well it describes man. Good peripheral vision – we can see this life and this world, what’s around us. But what lies ahead? What lies beyond this life? We cannot see that far ahead; there is only one way forward: trust the one who can see that far ahead; trust that He sees the best place to be and how to get there, trust the Shepherd. What did our Lord put at the bottom of His Divine Mercy Image? Jesus, I Trust in You. The sheep cannot see where the good pastures or water is, they have to rely on the Shepherd. What lies beyond (ultimately) is Heaven or hell but we can’t know the way to the good pasture – we have to trust the Shepherd when He tells us the way. We cannot even see beyond the bend in this life; we can’t always see the consequences of what we say, do, or think. We need a reliable source who can see and will tell us the truth. The Shepherd says: go this way and not that way, do this and not that, the sheep has no choice but to trust, if he wants to live, simply because he cannot see for himself. We have good peripheral vision, but poor depth perception. Pride – I know, I will decide for myself the right path, no God will “rule” me, I trust in me – all of this, putting myself who has poor depth perception above the Shepherd who has perfect depth perception – is plain foolishness, a fantasy. It is easy to see how all of these characteristics fit together – the sheep can’t see ahead (#2) so they must listen to the Shepherd (#1) or they will go off the cliff and be killed.

3. Sheep have a tendency to move out of the dark into well lit areas. In the third chapter of John’s Gospel, St John says: and this is the verdict; the light came into the world but man preferred darkness to light. An essential trait of *our Lord’s* sheep is that they tend to move out of the dark into the light, that they gain more and more light about themselves, their sins, they see even that core corruption of original sin. We must not be afraid of this – the light hurts a little at first, but it’s the only way to see the way. This light uncovers those things that take the person off of the Shepherd’s path and thus off the cliff, into death. Here again this ties in with all the rest – as the sheep hears, he sees (moves into the well lit area) and to do either, he has to trust the depth perception of the Shepherd. Our Lord’s sheep move into the light – they see the Shepherd better, they recognize His face and thus they come to know Him. They do this by using their excellent hearing. This light changes a

person's whole perspective on life and everything that happens in this life – placing all things in their proper perspective. The light puts the sheep at ease, gives him confidence. We arrive at this light by taking time to really ponder the Shepherd and His teachings (reading, study), spending time with Him (in the Blessed Sacrament) and true prayer. It will happen if we open the door.

4. Helplessness: sheep are easy prey, need a strong shepherd. Imagine a lamb against a hungry wolf or a wolf-pack. How often does the lamb win, how often does it survive? Never. This is man against Satan and the other demons. It's simply a fact that angels were created as far more powerful than man. There is no way for man to win...on his own. He must rely on the Shepherd. If the Shepherd abandons the sheep, they're dead. If the sheep leave the Shepherd, they can't survive. The wolf is always eyeing the flock so that the sheep's life is always in danger and is absolutely dependent on the protection of the Shepherd. It's a strange thing that the deader a person is, the more they are being devoured, the prouder they become. It's because they are blinded, they prefer the darkness, they refuse to move into the light, because they don't hear the Shepherd.

5. Sheep are stressed when separated from the flock. The essence of hell is separation from God, separation from all good. This will be the ultimate "stress," a never-ending "stress," of those who choose to separate themselves from the flock – our Lord and the Communion of Saints. On the other hand, truly following our Lord, the Good Shepherd, and being united to His flock is a great comfort, the burden becomes light and the yoke easy, even in this life. In this world and this life, people will do all kinds of things to try and cover up their stress from being separated from the flock – pride & self-righteousness, self-exultation through work, desperately clinging to human relations thus corrupting even this good, some form of pleasure or leisure, drugs, alcohol, and on and on the list goes. Lay it down. Don't be afraid. Trust in the one with perfect depth perception. Go in for full treatment. The burden is light and the yoke is easy. Let us take one example of the burden becoming light (freedom from "stress"). Suppose someone is nasty to you. You can grind your teeth, hold grudges, and so on, and what happens? I'm stressed and it wears me out – I'm not listening to the Shepherd and I'm separating myself from the flock. But now suppose you stop and think about it, you listen to the Shepherd and you remember your own sins, maybe times when you weren't the son or daughter you should have been, maybe not entirely unlike what that person is now doing to you. And then you say: thank you Lord, for this – I'm sorry and I offer it in reparation for my sins and the sins of the whole world. The stress (burden) is now light (not gone but light) precisely because you are now united with the Shepherd and His flock.

6. Flocking: sheep have a strong lead-follow tendency. We don't need to look any further than ourselves and everyday life to see that this is a strong tendency in man. This is, at one and the same time, both a great aid and a great curse for man, depending on who he's following. The inclination is follow the crowd, that's where safety is; whatever everybody else is doing, that's the way. People think that because they don't have a good depth perception and can't see where that's taking them. But our Lord's sheep, though generally a minority, know His voice, they move into the light, and they flock with the meek and humble of heart. If you want to be part of our Lord's flock, one of His sheep, associate yourself with the lowly. The path is going to be harder, rocky, difficult at times, people will mock and ridicule, but trust the Shepherd – He is the one, the only one, with perfect depth perception. Prideful people sometimes convince themselves that they are no sheep, that they follow no one but themselves. Because they refuse to move into the light, they don't realize that such a death-rattle is literally older than the hills – it is the snarl of Satan. So they are following someone after all, down a path of destruction. Don't be swayed. Keep your ears open to the Good Shepherd. Know His face, follow Him. Today there is much emphasis on "being a leader." This is all too often an appeal to pride, to self-importance. Lead where? You *are* following someone – either the Good Shepherd or the wolf. If you want to have a participation in true leadership, in any area, then you need to first learn to be a follower of the one true Shepherd. Otherwise, at least have the honesty to say that what I want to do is "lead" the way to destruction.

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We need to also consider the characteristics of the Shepherd. Perhaps this will be taken up next week.