

The Good Shepherd and His Sheep, Part 2

In the 10th chapter of the Gospel of John our Lord uses sheep and their shepherd to describe Himself (shepherd), us (sheep), and our relation with Him. It is easy to see how well the actual characteristics of sheep correspond to the characteristics necessary for those who would be disciples (sheep) of our Lord and thereby eventually get to Heaven; the characteristics of actual sheep was the topic of last week's article. This "parable" or analogy that our Lord uses, however, is packed with teachings so this week's article will continue with this 10th chapter of the Gospel of John, the Good Shepherd "parable," starting with characteristics of *good* shepherds.

In our Lord's time, sheep and shepherding were an integral part of Jewish culture or everyday life. In those days, a shepherd's sheep were exposed to many dangers, especially thieves and predators, although also perhaps shortage of pasture and water. The shepherd, then, had to be fully committed to his sheep, vigilantly providing for them, and guarding them. If he was not thinking of them always, first and foremost, they would be killed, stolen, or without pasture; they were done for. Robbers and predators were especially a threat at night. So the shepherd would have to find or make some sort of shelter for them at night. He might use a cave or he might build a sort of corral with stones and thorns on top to deter thieves and predators. Then, the shepherd himself would often lay in the entranceway, ready to fight against any attempt to harm or steal his sheep. If a thief or predator wanted to get to his sheep, they would have to literally go through him to get to them; they would have to kill the shepherd to get to the sheep. And this, of course, is exactly how our Lord is towards His sheep. He thinks of them day and night. He is constantly seeking to lead them to the best pastures and water sources – that which will give them real life. The sheep have poor depth perception, they can't see that far ahead, but the shepherd can. He will lead them even over hard terrain to get them to that which is best. He will bind up their wounds if they fall (the sacrament of His mercy). And most of all, He will lay down His life for His sheep.

As we think about this, does it not move us to respond in kind to one who cares so much for something so little as ourselves? It is necessary – not just helpful or nice or even important, but *necessary* – to really take time and think about just how good the Shepherd (our Lord) really is because the human will (which is what we use to choose) was created in such a way that it only chooses what the mind perceives as good. With the loss of the gifts that Adam & Eve had (like infused knowledge, clarity of mind) and with desires/feelings/passions that have now been disordered by original sin (meaning they incline us away from our true good), we have to use our minds to know the good of the Shepherd, and if we don't, we won't choose Him. So take time to run through your mind just how good the Good Shepherd is, how much he has done, how He has spared no expense, how He so desires your ultimate good – until it becomes an intrinsic, habitual frame of mind for you. This also prepares us for the rocky path – hard and difficult times – that the Shepherd has to lead us through in order to get to the finest pastures, indeed the one and only true pasture.

Our Lord starts this discourse on the Good Shepherd with these words:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens.”

He is giving a warning, here, both to His sheep and would-be thieves and predators. He doesn't want His sheep pulled off of the path, separated from Him, losing their lives. Notice, then, that the first thing He's saying is: there are wolves and thieves who will come after you, be aware of this and take care not to be pulled away and lose your life; remember your life does not consist of just this life and this world; that is only a very, *very* small part of your existence; you can't see that because you lack depth perception but I can. Say to the Good Shepherd: Jesus, I trust in You, and I will lead you to a final end, a pasture, that is magnificent beyond your imagination. He also warns the thief by telling him he *is* a thief and needs to repent or he will meet a bitter end.

We need to go further with our Lord's warning. What does the sheep need to beware of? The Door, Another Way, Thieves & Robbers – these are all related or intertwined in the verses above. Who or what is the door? Answering this question will help to know what is meant by the thief because the thief is contrary to (or in opposition to) The Door. “Who or what is the door” might seem like a ridiculous question because later in this passage our Lord states explicitly: *I am the door*. But what does that mean? In what way or what sense is He a

door, an entranceway, into this magnificent fold? This is needed in order not to be taken in by the thief. The Church Fathers take up that question. St John Chrysostom (Father and Doctor of the Church) says Scripture; St Augustine (also a Father and Doctor of the Church) simply says: Christ, as does St Thomas Aquinas. The Navarre Bible commentary says: Church doctrine. But notice that each of these is saying the same thing using different words: **The Door is the Truth** – the truth (or truths) that God has revealed (contained in Scripture, Church doctrine, “The Word” which is Christ Himself), the truth about ourselves (the sheep), and the truth about the relation between the 2, including what we are destined for and will receive if we follow the Shepherd.

But this immediately tells us what “Another Way” is and the nature of the thief, how he steals. “Another way” is *any* falsehood that creeps into our minds or that we concede to; it is wrong-thinking. Any falsehood – that is a vast, almost limitless, topic. Our Lord Himself said: broad is the path to perdition and many there are who choose it. One of the things this brings out, let’s make sure this sinks in, is the importance of:

- Really taking in and pondering what our Lord has revealed – stopping and thinking about what our Good Shepherd really tells, studying the faith in some way, reading good Catholic materials like lives and writings of the saints and of course Scripture itself. The sheep has poor depth perception and if he pays no attention to what the Shepherd says, he has no chance at arriving at the true pasture; you would have a better chance of getting to the moon by jumping up and down.
- Personal prayer. Real recollection where I silence myself and am alone with the Lord in my inner room. The Good Shepherd will then speak to us in our thoughts, pointing out to us, for one thing, the errors we have fallen into and perhaps warn us about those that lie ahead.
- Staying in a state of grace, use of the sacrament of Confession. The importance of this is grossly underestimated. Being “in a state of grace” means that the Holy Trinity actually dwells within you and this alone serves as good protection but also opens us up to hearing the Shepherd.
- “Grace” is basically the term for the aid provided by the Shepherd. More grace = more help. The Shepherd bestows His grace, not exclusively but principally, in and through His sacraments and in a premier way in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and the Holy Eucharist – hence: “the Bread of *Life*.”

These are the things that protect against, and root out, the thief; the things that keep a person on the narrow path and away from the broad path, the things that bind the sheep to the Shepherd.

It is impossible to make a list of all the ways that one can get on the broad path, a list of all the falsehoods that one can fall into or explicitly choose. Thus it is necessary to focus on knowing the narrow path. Although impossible to make a complete list of all the entrances onto the broad path, perhaps a few helpful words can be said. Chrysostom and Augustine give some general principles of what “Another way” (or the broad path) consists of. Chrysostom says: some tradition of man (man-made, not from God) leading him to neglect the true law of God. St Augustine says: many say they’re good...*by some worldly standard*; these, he says, generally boast of themselves, as the Pharisees did. How easy it is for a sheep who lacks depth perception, to simply look around at what he can see and then choose to glorify himself by some worldly standard. “Another Way” = false teaching, false belief, resulting in death & misery, this is the reason for returning over and over again to popular false beliefs, false philosophies, for example, that have now become popular beliefs. At the core, especially today, is the belief that I can make my own truth, I (or whatever is popular) am/is the sole arbiter of what is right and good and true. And then this mentality is so often brought into the human dimension of the Church as well, which is an outright rejection of the Shepherd. You are the Good Shepherd, Jesus I trust in you, is replaced with: I am the Good Shepherd, I trust in me, my desires, my feelings, which is intrinsically anti-Christ.

The thief, then, is the one who promotes false beliefs, which can be done in both word and deed. He is called a thief because he does this so as to usurp for his own, his own glorification, that which belongs to our Lord. Let us finish this by recalling that this “parable” was in response to Pharisees who were denouncing Him. Jesus is saying they, the leaders of the day, are thieves. Everyone, especially priests, must take care not to become a thief. The sheep are the Lord’s, not his. Priests, as well as parents, are given a participation in our Lord’s shepherding and must remain true to it – leading the sheep to our Lord, not to themselves. To build up the Kingdom of God, take care not to insist that the priest become a thief or a hireling. God bless you, Fr Kuhn.