

One of the Gospel passages that the Church presents to us during the Easter Season is our Lord's discourse on Himself as the Good Shepherd, which comes from the 10th chapter of the Gospel of John. Our Lord's teaching here lays down some very fundamental, foundational aspects of our relation with Him. Fundamental, foundational means they are a starting point, i.e., without them we have no relation with Him, which means no Heaven, which means eternal misery. It is worthwhile, then, to spend time dwelling on our Lord's words here.

In the Good Shepherd discourse, our Lord speaks of "My sheep." Is it: MY sheep – meaning that all people are sheep (and thus have the characteristics of sheep); or is it my SHEEP – meaning that only those who follow the Lord have the characteristics of sheep? Are all created beings (at least those with an intellect) sheep – even those who permanently rebel, in which case it's MY sheep? Or, are only those who do the will of God sheep...and thus, my SHEEP...the others being, perhaps "goats," for example? If by "My sheep," Jesus means the latter – that only those who follow Him are sheep – then the characteristics of sheep can serve as a model for man, i.e., what we have to be like in order to receive our Lord, the Shepherd.

The great St Augustine, Father and Doctor of the Church, took up this question and concluded that it is my SHEEP – that when our Lord speaks of sheep, He is only talking about those who die in His good grace, those who ultimately follow Him and do His will. Some people might rebel at first, Augustine says, but then convert and follow our Lord (Augustine uses the example of St Paul); they become sheep. Others might at least appear to follow initially but then rebel (like Judas Iscariot); they are not sheep or at least do not end up as sheep.

So what are the characteristics of sheep that lead to accepting our Lord as Shepherd? When I was in seminary, I was assigned John 10 for a report. One thing I did was to dig into the characteristics of sheep. After finding these characteristics from Iowa State University, I could not help but think that our Lord created sheep in the way that He did, precisely for the purpose of giving us this teaching in John 10.

One characteristic of sheep is that they have good peripheral vision but poor depth perception. I have talked about this before but it may be the most important one so it bears some repeating. Sheep can see on a horizontal level, they can see what's around them, but they can't see far ahead, they can't see what lies down the road; they need a shepherd who can so as to not only avoid getting killed but also to find feed and water – green pastures. There are many threats to them, green pastures and water are in limited locations only, and so they will die if they just wander aimlessly without the shepherd protecting them and showing them the way. This "metaphor" fits us and our relation with the Lord to a tee. Man can see pretty well what's around him in this life and this world; he might even be able to know some of the short-term consequences of his actions, consequences in the here and now. But that's it. He cannot see far in the distance; to a large extent, he cannot even see what lies around the corner, what waits for him in this life and this world; he cannot see what good his suffering or setbacks might bring about or what happens if he refuses to bear with them patiently, or for that matter what good patience is to begin with. And for sure he cannot see what lies beyond this life – good? evil? both? If there is good beyond on this life, he has no idea how to reach it, in which case he'll never reach it. Man needs a shepherd, a Good Shepherd, one who desires what is best for him, knows what is best and how to bring it about, and has the power to do it. Our Lord is that Good Shepherd. Notice that the sheep has to trust the shepherd because the sheep himself cannot see ahead.

But that is not enough. The sheep must be willing to listen to and follow the Good Shepherd. Another characteristic of sheep, according to this university resource, is that they have excellent hearing. If you want to follow the Lord to ultimate happiness and avoid ultimate misery, you have to listen to Him. This will mean prayer and study of what He has revealed. According to this resource, sheep can even recognize individual (distinct) human voices and even faces. They will follow their shepherd. There are many who want to steal the sheep for themselves and try to entice them with all kinds of things that appeal to their appetite. But the one who makes it to Heaven is willing to listen only to the Lord, and will not follow an imposter. I cannot be deaf to the Lord day in and day out and think that I am following where He leads, that I am going to Heaven.

Sheep have a tendency to move out of the dark and into well lit areas. The light of Christ consists of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. Do I move towards that light? Aquinas said that wisdom is attained by: seeking diligently, listening willingly, meditating attentively, and responding prudently; does that sound like what I do? Knowledge, wisdom, understanding – these lead to true, deep, genuine self-knowledge which leads to sincere repentance. Have I experienced real repentance, deep sorrow for my sins? Is the Lord my Shepherd?

Sheep become stressed when separated from the flock. Do I have a genuine fear of the Lord? Am I stressed if I commit a mortal sin? Do I seek Confession as soon as possible? Do I spend time with the Lord outside of Mass, or am I just as comfortable without it?

Sheep have a strong lead-follow tendency. This is a big one. Who is the decider of what is right and good and true? Me or the Shepherd? Do I accept what He says, what He calls me to, even if it goes against my desires, or do I get mule-headed and say: I know better, what I want, I reject this or that – morality, the definitive teachings of the Church, or the Church's discipline? Am I willing to stand with the Shepherd when He is despised, deplored, treated like scum of the earth? Will I follow then, stand with Him, accept such things? Without the willingness to follow our Lord regardless of what that entails, I have rejected Him and thus Heaven.

We should be careful to think about ourselves carefully as to whether or not I am sheep, and not to be too quick to count myself amongst them. Our Lord said to the Pharisees, chief priests, scribes – those who considered themselves the great religious men of the day and the leader of the people: you do not believe because you are not my sheep. This also emphasizes the necessity of the characteristics of the sheep.

There are other protagonists, however, in this teaching, namely: the Good Shepherd, the thief and the hireling. What distinguishes the Good Shepherd? First, our Lord calls Himself “the door” for the sheep. What does this mean, the door to what? The Shepherd united to His sheep is the parallel for God united to the saints and it is in this context that our Lord calls Himself the door. So our Lord is the door to Heaven, and he says there is no other way. Perhaps here we can see fittingness of this Gospel for the Easter Season. During the Easter Season the Church contemplates the mystery of the Resurrection – Heaven, those who receive a glorified, who get to participate in the Resurrection to life, which is only for those who have followed our Lord by accepting their own Good Friday in this life and this world. What is really the distinguishing characteristic of the *Good* Shepherd? He lays down His life for His sheep. He also knows His sheep and His sheep know Him. In the language of Scripture, knowledge means a union, a union between the knower and the thing known; in this case between the Good Shepherd and His sheep – between our Lord and His saints. This union is called love.

The Good Shepherd is contrasted with the thief who comes only to steal and kill and destroy. What is it overall that our Lord is presenting here? Man, as John Paul II said, is made for [mutual, reciprocated, complete] love and is unfulfilled, frustrated, until he finds it. The Good Shepherd is the only one who can fulfill that desire; He shows His love by laying down His life for the sheep. But the thief only wants for himself; he wants the sheep for his own self, his own self-interests. The thief dangles the trinkets of this life and this world out in front of man, things that appeal to his disordered desires – money, respectability, comfort, pleasure, vengeance and the list goes on and on; if the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, says the Psalm. Am I controlled by wants? The Pharisees were thieves. They did not seek to lead people to God but to themselves. They wanted that which belonged to God for themselves. The thief is Satan, temptation, false teaching and all those who depart from our Lord and teach or coax others to do the same. The hireling is not necessarily a thief, he just doesn't care about the sheep; he doesn't try to take the sheep but he too acts only out of self-interest. The wolves are the threats that face the sheep in this life and this world – if you follow the Good Shepherd, we will get you; the wolf seeks to deter you from genuine love – sacrifice of self for the sake of the other – with threats to your well-being here and now. The wolf threatens so as to get you to trade your ultimate good for a sense of safety and security in this life. Love is not “safe” in this world, it is expensive; but it is also the only true good for man.

One last thing is that many are called to participate in our Lord's Shepherding – popes, bishops, priests, religious, yes, but also parents, older brothers & sisters, and so on. Take care to participate well, not to be a thief or hireling. Your life depends it. *God bless you. Fr Kuhn*