

Guidance in Shepherding Sheep

10 MINUTES WITH JESUS

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My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that You are here, that You see me, and that You hear me. I adore You with profound reverence. I ask Your pardon for my sins, and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful.

My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

A few years ago, I was given a book called *The Shepherd's Life*, which describes the life of a Cumbrian hill farmer. Cumbria is a rural part of the north of England known for its sheep farming and it just happens to be the region where I was born and brought up. And at the beginning of this book, the author describes a term associated with sheep farming called *hefting*. If a sheep is hefted, it means that as a result of long years of breeding the sheep know exactly the land on which they belong and where they will be safe. It's almost in their DNA to have a sense of where they should be.

And so, as a result of this, they don't just wander off all over the place but they remain almost by instinct in the same geographical area. And so there's no need for fences or walls of any kind because the sheep remain firmly on their own ground. This rather striking image of the hefted sheep could help us reflect a little bit on the whole concept of the Good Shepherd.

As Christians we have been similarly hefted in the sense that we know exactly where we should belong. We belong to Christ. He is our home and indeed our whole world. As we hear in the Responsorial Psalm of the Mass today, *"The Lord is my Shepherd, there is nothing I shall want. Fresh and green are the pastures where He gives me repose. Near restful waters He leads me. He revives my soul"* (Ps 23:1-3).

In Christ, the Good Shepherd, we know that we are safe and that all our needs will be taken care of. Even if through some unfortunate circumstance we wander to an unknown place, we're still sure of where we really should be, and every fiber of our being cries out to return.

Well, in today's Gospel, we see what being a Good Shepherd really looks like. We see the selfless attitude of the apostles, laboring intensely among the people. We're told that they were so busy ministering to the needs of others, that they didn't have time even to eat. That generosity of spirit is something that we should try and emulate. I'm not suggesting that we go without eating but we should certainly try and give of our time, our energy, our resources without counting the cost. Whenever we are generous in our response to God, then He always surpasses us in that generosity.

Pope Benedict XVI spoke very movingly on this subject to a group of young people shortly after he became pope: "Do not be afraid of Christ. He takes nothing away and He gives you everything. When we give ourselves to Him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Open wide the doors to Christ and you will find true life."

Those who have taken on the great task of shepherding the people have a huge responsibility. I have a huge responsibility as a priest. I'm not only accountable for my own soul but also for the souls of those who have been entrusted to me. The path to Heaven for a priest involves taking many people with him, and as the prophet Jeremiah pointed out many times, judgment will be severe on those who have been negligent in their duties.

But there's also a sense in which everyone shares in this task of shepherding. All of us have areas of responsibility where we are called to lead and to guide others. I'm thinking in particular now, of the realm of family life. Think of the love that parents have towards their children and the responsibility that they have of teaching them and guiding them. Parents are good shepherds to their children, providing them with the essentials of how to live and leading them by their example towards Heaven.

I'm always struck by that moment in the Baptismal rite, when the responsibility of the parents of the child being baptized is clearly spelled out. They're described as being the first teachers of their child in the ways of faith, and the text goes on to say 'may they also be the best of teachers, bearing witness to the faith by what they say and do.' This is a clear example of parents being good shepherds to their children.

So how do we do this? How do we become the good shepherds that Jesus wants us to be? Well we need to stay very close to You, Lord and to rely on You. In the Gospel, You recognize that the apostles need rest. *"Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while"* (Mk 6:31).

All of us need to rest, not in the sense of doing nothing, but in order to recharge our batteries. And we do this by spending periods of time away from the activity of our daily life, and learning to rely on God in prayer.

And we can't be good shepherds if we're not serious about prayer. We can't be good shepherds by relying on ourselves. However much gifts and talents we may have been given, we need to remain intimately connected to the Lord. And if we remain close to Him in our prayer and by making use of the Sacraments, then He will not allow us to drift too far from the right path. He will give us the strength that we need to achieve things that seem humanly impossible.

And the sheep will recognize in us the voice of the True Shepherd, which is Christ Himself. Pope Francis speaks very powerfully about pastors being so involved in the lives of the people that they transmit almost from their very being the smell of the sheep. The priest should be so intimately connected with his flock, that something about him becomes identified with the presence of those he ministers to. And it's the same for those in other states of life – for mothers

and fathers, teachers, employers, friends, family members. It's always the duty of the shepherd to love the sheep with an intense love.

But sometimes, this love involves gently correcting the sheep, telling them when things are not as they should be. This can be hard particularly in an age where people do not automatically give respect to those in any kind of authority. But it is part of having a genuine care for people, to help them along the right path. And of course, any kind of correction always stems from a concern for the person's well-being, rather than from any high-handedness or a sense of superiority.

I'm sure too that we can all put ourselves in the position of the lost sheep. So often in life, we have found ourselves far from where we should be. Thankfully, Jesus, the Good Shepherd is always on hand to help us. He never abandons us and He will continue to search for us until we are found and carried safely home.

I thank You, my God, for the good resolutions, affections and inspirations which You have communicated to me in this meditation. I ask Your help to put them into effect.

My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.