

Homily for April 17, 2005
4th Sunday of Easter A Cycle

By Father Charles Bowes

Acts 2:14, 36-41

Psalm 23:1-6

1 Peter 2:20-25

John 10:1-10

Whoever enters through Jesus as the gate will find pasture, be saved, and have abundant life.

Some of the images the gospels give us of Jesus as the shepherd touch on the deepest of human desires. The longing to be known and accepted, to be called by one's name, to be guided and nourished and led into paths of relationship with God are all gifts of grace.

Jesus presents himself as the model of a relationship of intimacy between the shepherd and his sheep. If we are one of his sheep, we are already known. We are already called by our true name. We are not strangers to Jesus. What Jesus offers us is true to our heart's desire. We have a shepherd who has come to bring us abundant life, who knows us individually and allows us to know him intimately.

This is a beautiful thought: a relationship with Jesus, in our increasingly electronic and impersonal age, that is so significant. We are such a numbered people – numbers on checks, driver's licenses, social security cards, credit cards, passports. Our lives are continually being reduced to numerical equations.

The image of Jesus as a shepherd makes a good story, because it underscores the basis of prejudice, racism and persecution. When we can reduce people to categories – making them abstractions, not thinking their names are important – we can de-personalize them and make it easier to write them off as unimportant. In the United States, slaves were often referred to as “boys” or “darkies.” Not to know someone's name is to see them as insignificant. It is

interesting that we are called by name when we receive most of the sacraments. We don't use names in the distribution of Holy Communion or ashes on Ash Wednesday, because all are equal at the table, and for the minister to call by name only those he or she knows would discriminate, make unequal what is meant to be the same for all.

I'm reminded of a story of an old Indian sheep farmer whose neighbor's dogs were continually killing his sheep. To remedy the situation, he came up with three options. He could sue and bring his neighbor to court. He could build a stronger and higher fence to keep the dogs out. Finally, he chose a third option: He gave two lambs to his neighbor's children. In due time, the lambs grew up and had other little lambs, and the neighbor and his children got to see the sheep not as an impersonal herd, but as something warm and fuzzy.

They soon penned in their dogs, and the problem was solved. Jesus is the Shepherd of the Jews and the Samaritans and the Gentiles, the Shepherd of rejects, lepers, thieves, and the God of you and me and those far off. He knows all of us and each of us by name! As Saint Augustine wrote: “God loves each of us as if there is only one of us.”

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