

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Year A

Acts 2:14a, 36-41
Ps 23: 1-3a, 3b4, 5, 6
I Pt 2:20b-25
Jn 10:1-10

James D. Paradis, O.S.A.
Church of Saint Augustine
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

A few years ago, there was a weekly segment of NBC Nightly News that always captured my attention. It was called *The Fleecing of America*. The program used reporters to investigate and feature large outlays by government leaders of taxpayers' money for needless, often ridiculous, uses. Although not featured on this program, I have kept a news clipping from that time which reported on a "fleecing" that actually took place: the dispatching of an Air Force cargo plane that seated 200 people and a crew of 13--to fly a U.S. general and his cat from Italy to Colorado at the cost of \$116,000! We all have heard remarkable stories of "fleecing."

In today's Gospel, when the evangelist John has Jesus describing himself as both shepherd and gate for the sheep, he is not trying to portray him as the soft and sentimental fellow we see often pictured in stained-glass windows, disconnected from life. Rather, he has Jesus comparing true shepherding with the false shepherding—and fleecing—of many religious leaders of his day, who were more concerned with themselves than for the well being of their flocks. Jesus offers a stark contrast between himself and the Pharisees. He is the true shepherd whose sheep will follow him. They are thieves and robbers, out to destroy. What did they steal? It's not entirely clear. Perhaps they fleeced their trusting flocks of hard-earned wages. What did they rob? Perhaps peoples' sense of self-worth and dignity in the way in which they were treated and instructed in their faith.

What's clear is that Jesus is the new and good shepherd of God's ways. He is committed to guarding, guiding and pasturing his flock. He knows his sheep each by name; he cares for them deeply, even to the point of giving his life for them. In the Risen Christ, we have a shepherd who continues to nurture and heal us in word and sacrament, holding out to us the grace and abundance of new life. We strive to listen and hear this unique voice in our lives so that, in the words of St. Peter, "free from sin, we might live for righteousness."

But the loving care of the shepherd is not simply meant to comfort us; it also challenges our own shepherding. Whether we are parents or grandparents, politicians or pastors, we are called to leadership as modeled in Christ. The Franciscan speaker and author Richard Rohr said it well: "To be a leader is to author life in others." Isn't this what Jesus proclaimed and lived? With courage and compassion, listening to the voice of his Father, he named reality and called people to God's vision of life and their best selves in God. He was authentic as a leader in that people trusted that he had their best interests at heart as he guided and challenged them.

We might ask ourselves: How is Christ Risen in the way I lead or we lead—in the language we use; the attitudes we convey; the judgments we make; the regard or disregard we show for others? Is it "all about me" and my need to control? Or would others find in me the grace of the good shepherd—taking time to know others as individuals to be familiar with their struggles; being willing to stand with them as well as challenging them in the course of life to grow and flourish.

If there is anywhere that leadership must be modeled after the Jesus the true shepherd, it is in the Church. Pope Benedict XVI makes his first papal visit to the United States this week. He comes during a time of great strains in the American Church, not the least of which is the continuing fallout from the clergy sexual abuse scandals and the way they were handled by the church's leaders. I remember quite clearly on Good Shepherd Sunday in 2002, at the height of this scandal's media coverage in Boston, a woman came up to me after mass with tears in her eyes and said, "Where were the shepherds in protecting the sheep?"

Much has been done to address this crisis; church leaders have sincerely reached out to victims; they have acknowledged mistakes, and have genuinely expressed sorrow and asked for forgiveness. We've been humbled and humiliated. Great efforts are being made to restore trust and renew life. Still, this crisis along with the lack of dialogue on a number of important issues in the American Church, has shaken the confidence of faithful Catholics like nothing else, cutting into the credibility of the shepherds. Many people—clergy and lay persons alike—feel fleeced of their baptismal voice on important matters, left out and wandering as sheep trying to find pasture. It is a time of transition—when there is a longing for leadership to honestly look into the darkness and difficulties of our times and of our church community. There is hope that together as church, united in the Spirit of Jesus that we might discern and find a path of light for the future.

The Pope comes—like Peter in the Acts of the Apostles—as a courageous preacher of conversion and truth of the Gospel. He has chosen as his theme for this trip, "Christ our Hope." He will undoubtedly speak words of hope to a hurting church in need of healing and renewal. He will likely call us to come back to Christ as our hope for creating a more just and loving society and a world free of hatred and violence. At the same time, what an Easter gift it would be if, as chief shepherd, he would also come to know more deeply both the beauty and the pain of his flock in this country, that in some way with his encouragement we might take bold steps toward needed reforms and changes. Easter is about embracing newness of life that Christ offers us. The shepherding of new life is so needed for us to grow as a community of openness, integrity and love in Jesus Christ.

Ultimately, while we might know fleecing and false paths of all kinds, we rely on the strength of the One whom Peter reminds us is shepherd and guardian of our souls. It is he who feeds us now with the food of the eucharist, his very life. In him and the power of his resurrection, we will have life and have it in abundance.