

## FROM THE PASTOR'S PRINTER

### THE SHEEPISH SHEPHERD

The gospel readings of first three Sundays of the Easter season proclaim the appearances of the risen Christ to His bewildered but none the less joy-filled disciples. This Sunday serves as a transition from the appearances to reflection on who Christ is and who we are in light of His resurrection. Each year of the three-year cycle of the lectionary we hear on this Fourth Sunday of Easter some aspect of Jesus in relations to His sheep from John's Gospel, chapter ten. Today, we hear Jesus refer to Himself as the sheep gate through which the true shepherds enter and exit to bring their sheep to pasture and then home again for the night. In the verses that immediately follow today's Gospel (vs. 1-10), Jesus refers to himself as the good shepherd as well (v. 11).

The interesting thing about Jesus seeing himself as tending sheep, whether as a gatekeeper or a shepherd, is that the prophets, most notably Isaiah and St. John the Baptist, refer to Jesus not as the shepherd but as the lamb, and not as a cute and cuddly one, but as a sacrificial lamb. Now, we might think that Isaiah and John did not consult with Jesus to know which image he would be. Is He sheep or shepherd? Both are true. Just as Jesus is the sheep gate and the shepherd, so he is both the shepherd and a sheep. But why?

First of all, almost every way in which Jesus is described is a metaphor because Jesus – God made human in all things but sin – is unique to Himself. We cannot fully understand divine reality, so we use metaphors and analogies to explain Him. Every analogy limps, as they say. In other words, it cannot reflect perfectly what it is pointing to because it is not that reality.

The Jesus is referred to as the Lamb of God because He is the one who is sacrificed to free us from the slavery of sin and death and make us God's children, just as the lambs of Passover were sacrificed for the Israelite so that they might be free of Egyptian slavery and death. A lamb goes to its death without a fight. The lamb gives his all for the people (anything remaining after the meal is to be burnt). Now this

understanding of the lamb as the victim of the sacrifice of the new covenant shows us how using the lamb as in image of Jesus makes sense. Yet, Jesus was not an unwitting victim as is a lamb. He is the victim who chose to give Himself over for our salvation. He did this because He saw (and still sees) His mission from his Father to gather all people to Himself so that He could present to His Father all people as the Father's children – not just the Chosen People, but all people.

What better image could God have chosen than that of a shepherd to speak of gathering people together! As I mentioned above, all analogies limp, and this is one of them. Jesus is not a normal shepherd. Ultimately, the shepherd cares for the sheep so that a profit may be made from wool or mutton. Jesus shepherds out of pure love. He lays down His life for His sheep. No other shepherds do this. They might fight for the sheep to protect their profit and may die in the process, but they do not intentionally die for the sake of the sheep. Jesus intentionally gives his life for his sheep. He is both the Priest and the Victim of the offering. Yet the shepherding Jesus does is not only to die for His sheep, but to guide them in safe pastures, bring them back when they are lost, nourish and water them, and bring them home safely. He trains them to know His voice and follow in His ways. The sheep hear many sounds, but they need to follow that of their shepherd to be protected. Jesus's voice will not simply lead them someplace; it will actually unite the sheep to Him. Christ's sheep, unlike the merely woolly kind, will come to live in him, in His Holy Spirit.

This is where the image of Jesus as gate and gatekeeper comes into play. Those called by Christ to lead the sheep, and the sheep themselves pass through the gate; they go through Christ. This passing through Christ brings a sense of unity and adherence to Christ. He is the one makes sure the shepherd is the right one leading the sheep. Jesus: Lamb – Shepherd – Gate and Gatekeeper. How good is the good God to us to be all that we need to come to eternal life!

**MARK YOUR CALENDARS!** Parishioner Alex Witt, son of Mike and the late Jennifer Witt, will be ordained a priest on Saturday May 20<sup>th</sup> for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati and will celebrate a Mass of Thanksgiving at St. John's at 11 AM on Sunday, June 18<sup>th</sup>, with a reception to follow. Please keep Deacon Alex in your prayers.