



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

Date: 07 May 2006
Title: **"The Good (Brave, Strong, Courageous) Shepherd."**
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Acts 4:32-37
Second Reading 1 John 3:1-8
Gospel John 10:11-16

One of the old Easter hymns sings about the Resurrected Lord using these words:

"Praise we him, who love divine gives his sacred blood for wine,
Gives his Body for the feast, *Christ the victim, Christ the priest.*" (Hymnal 1982,
#174)

It is a good example of the dichotomy, the contrasts that we must deal with in our Christian imagery. You will remember that I mentioned this before, on Palm Sunday, when the irony of the switch from joyful hosanna's to the sorrowful Passion reading provided such a jarring contrast. In Easter, we have it again with Christ, the "Lamb of God" sacrificed for the sins of the world, also being hailed as the "Great High Priest" presenting the perfect offering to the Father. How can the victim be the one that sacrifices? How can both of these images exist together? Somehow they do, in the same way that we celebrate the entry of the Lord God Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth into the human sphere as a vulnerable, helpless little baby boy.

Such a challenge, too, is today's theme that presents Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The Gospel, for example, shares Jesus' words: "I am the good shepherd...and I lay down my life for my sheep." This, too, is jarring when, before Communion in the Eucharist today, we will address our Lord as "Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world." In the same service, then, Jesus is being described as the sacrificial lamb, the priest who offers the lamb, and the shepherd who protects and dies for the lambs! To quote Yul Brenner, "Is a puzzlement." And that is what Christianity is like: a kaleidoscope of images, stories and experiences worthy of a movement that takes in all nations, all races, all orientations and all imaginations, too. To appreciate Jesus for who he is, one must see him from all sides and be ready to have old, comfortable images of our Lord challenged and changed.

And that brings us back to that image of the Shepherd. To understand it, and to use it correctly, we have to banish from our thoughts, at least for the present, the pictures from our childhood with Jesus holding the little lamb in his arms, walking through a lush, very European pasture, usually in bare feet. The person in that picture really doesn't look like someone you'd trust to fight off a lion or a bear that might be attacking the flocks. The life of the shepherd was, and still is, much more robust and hearty, and courageous. That is the image that Jesus wants us to use: the good shepherd...meaning the brave shepherd and the shepherd who isn't afraid of putting himself in danger for the sake of the flock in his charge.

Most people don't think of Jesus that way, because their first exposure to him was in the Sunday School classroom or the devotional books found there. Unfortunately, we sanitize and clean Jesus up for our children. No wonder then that as they get older and start to discover that life is a lot harder and more dangerous than it was with mamma, poppa and yaya to make things nice for us, they reject not only this image of Jesus, but also the Christian Faith as a whole. Children appreciate the truth more than they do pleasant lies, and they deserve to hear the kind of loving and courageous leader their religion has.

Last month, I was asked to lead an assembly for the lower level classes at a local school. The theme was 'Easter.' I found that the children there, of whatever

background or even religion, knew the Easter story pretty well. They knew it had to do with death and resurrection, with sorrow being transformed into joy by the intervention of a loving God. One English-born teacher, however, didn't bring her class to the assembly. She met me before the event began and told me that she just "wasn't sure" what I was going to say to the children. She herself didn't want to tell them about, as she put it: "crucifixions and that kind of thing." So she had scheduled another activity for her charges. As I talked to the others about new life, hope and the incarnational love of God shown in Christ's Resurrection, she had her children dress up in funny hats and parade around the school. Her kids deserved more, and they would have understood more than she gave them credit for. They just might have had the opportunity for a spiritual journey of greater significance than an "Easter Parade."

What kind of Jesus should we tell our children, or even our non-Christian friends, about?

Should it be the effete, pastel Jesus of the old Sunday School pictures: Jesus the Good, but probably rather ineffectual Shepherd? Or can we trust them with the truth? Can we tell them that the image Jesus used about himself was that of a rugged, but concerned leader, whose care for his sheep isn't mercenary or conditional, and who was willing...indeed still is willing...to venture all for the safety of those in his charge? I think that Jesus' own words tell us what to say:

"I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father' and I lay down my life for the sheep. And there are other sheep I have that are not of this fold, and these I have to lead as well. They too will listen to my voice, and there will be only one flock and one shepherd."

That, my friends, is a shepherd worthy of the name.