

GOSPEL

JOHN 10:11-18

Jesus said: 'I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd is one who lays down his life for his sheep. The hired man, since he is not the shepherd and the sheep do not belong to him, abandons the sheep and runs away as soon as he sees a wolf coming, and then the wolf attacks and scatters the sheep; this is because he is only a hired man and has no concern for the sheep.

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 my 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.

The Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me; I lay it down of my own free will, and as it is in my power to lay it down, so it is in my power to take it up again; and this is the command I have been given by my Father.'

A REFLECTION BY POPE FRANCIS

The Liturgy of this Fourth Sunday of Easter pursues the aim of helping us rediscover our identity as *disciples of the Risen Lord*. In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter openly declares that the healing of the cripple, which he carried out and which all of Jerusalem speaks about, took place in the name of Jesus, because "there is salvation in no one else" (Acts 4:12). There in that healed man is each one of us — that man is the shape of ourselves: we are all there within — there are our communities: each of us can be healed of the many forms of spiritual infirmity that we have — ambition, laziness, pride — if we agree, with confidence, to put our very existence into the hands of the Risen Lord. "By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth", affirms Peter, "this man is standing before you well" (Acts 4:10). But who is the Christ who heals? What does being healed by him consist in? What are we healed of? And by means of what attitudes?

The answer to all these questions can be found in today's Gospel, where Jesus says: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep". This self-introduction by Jesus cannot be reduced to an emotional suggestion, without any concrete effect! Jesus heals through his being a shepherd who lays down his life. Giving his life for us, Jesus says to each one: 'Your life is worth so much to me, that to save it I give all of myself'. It is precisely this *offering of his life* that makes him the *Good Shepherd par excellence*, the One who heals, the One who allows us to live a beautiful and fruitful life.

The second part of the same Gospel passage tells us how Jesus can heal us and make our life joyful and fruitful: "I am the good shepherd", Jesus says. "I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father". Jesus does not speak of intellectual knowledge, no, but of a personal relationship, of predilection, of mutual tenderness, reflection of the same intimate loving relationship between him and the Father. This is the attitude through which a living relationship with Jesus is realized: *allowing ourselves to be known* by him. Not closing up within ourselves; but opening ourselves to the Lord, so that he may know us. He is attentive to each one of us; he knows the depths of our heart: he knows our merits and our defects, the projects we have carried out and the hopes that have gone unfulfilled. But he accepts us as we are, even with our sins, so as to heal us, to forgive us; he guides us with love, so that we can cross even impervious paths without losing the way. He accompanies us.

In turn, we are called *to know Jesus*. This implies an encounter with him, an encounter which spurs the desire to follow him, abandoning self-referential attitudes and setting out on new paths, indicated by Christ himself and open to vast horizons. When in our communities the desire to live the relationship with Jesus, to listen to his voice and to follow him faithfully cools down, it is inevitable that other ways of thinking

and living that are not consistent with the Gospel will prevail. May Mary, our Mother, help us to develop an ever stronger relationship with Jesus. Opening ourselves to Jesus, so that he may enter within us. A stronger relationship: He is Risen. In this way, we can follow him all our life. On this World Day of Prayer for Vocations, may Mary intercede so that many may respond with generosity and perseverance to the Lord who calls us to leave everything for His Kingdom.

Reflection Questions

- In what ways have you experienced Jesus as 'the good shepherd', leading and guiding you in your journey? How do you feel about him having laid down his life for you?
- Jesus invites us into the same deep, intimate and loving relationship with him that he has with his Father. Pope Francis describes this well. What has been your experience of this relationship, do you and Jesus know each other deeply and intimately?
- What impact has your relationship with Jesus had on your life?

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. "Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray")
3. Move to prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others' prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps reciting the 'Glory Be' or similar prayer.