

IV Easter (c): Good Shepherd Sunday

Rv 7.9-17; Jn 10.22-30

25 April 2010

Fr. Patrick Allen

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We are, at least we like to think we are, lovers of plain speech. "Just the facts, ma'am." "Give it to me straight, Doc." "Tell it like it is." Candidate John McCain reached his political height when he toured the country on the "Straight Talk Express." (Of course, it turns out that both candidates and electors have a limited tolerance for straight talk.)

Well, plain talk is admirable. The Bible itself has a great deal to say about that: "Let your yes be yes, and your no be no," says our Lord.

But it is also true that talk, however plain, is not adequate to every truth, and certainly not the best and highest truths. Some pictures are worth more than a thousand words, no matter how plain. Otis Redding caught every lover's poetic dilemma when he sang:

*Let me sit beside you,
I just couldn't wait for not another day,
I love you, baby, more than words can say.*

I've got something to tell you, but it's "more than words can say." Words between lovers are important; they matter. But, as Mr. Redding knew, they cannot be equal to a heart's truth, and true love is only truly expressed by the story of a lifetime's faithful devotion and self-offering.

The Southern writer and devout Catholic Christian Flannery O'Connor once gave a reading of one of her stories to a group of college undergraduates, and during the Q&A session afterward, a student asked her, bluntly, if she couldn't just simply tell them what the story "meant." To which Miss O'Connor responded, bluntly, "Well, if I could just tell you the meaning, I wouldn't have bothered to write the story." In a lecture to another group of students, she would make much the same point: "A story is a way to say something that [cannot] be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is."

As we have read in our Gospel lesson for this Good Shepherd Sunday, one winter's day, while walking in the Temple courts at Jerusalem, our Lord was confronted by a crowd of his fellow Jews who had a question – a straightforward question to which they wanted (actually, they demanded) – a straightforward answer: "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly?"

Tell us plainly. But of course our Lord seldom spoke plainly about his identity and vocation as the Christ of God. There was of course the case of the Samaritan woman at the well – *the Messiah? I who speak to you am he*, said Jesus – but who besides Jesus would even bother to speak to such a person, much less receive her testimony?

And when his disciples, his friends, those on the receiving end of his powerful works of mercy guessed – or we should say, drew the correct conclusion based on what they had seen in the life of Jesus – he charged them sternly to tell no one.

But we might think especially of the disciples who come to Jesus with a question from John the Baptist, languishing in prison and expecting soon to die: "Are you the one who was to come, or should we look for another?" A straightforward question in search of a straightforward answer. And how does Jesus respond? "Go, tell John what

you see and what you hear: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.”

Jesus’ identity and his vocation – that is to say, the *meaning* of Jesus – is revealed in the story of his life, and it cannot truly be known in any other way. And on this winter’s day strolling through the Temple courts, responding to this crowd which wants, which demands, to be told – and told plainly – whether or not he is the Christ, Jesus responds, “I have told you and you would not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness to me.”

The meaning of Jesus is revealed not so truly in theological abstractions and propositions, as important and necessary as they are, as in his story, in his works. And, as Ms. O’Connor reminds us, “it takes every word – the whole story – to say what the meaning is.” Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and his sheep hear his voice in his works, his story: *the works bear witness*.

And what is it that the sheep hear? That the Good Shepherd’s power is bent to mercy and subservient to love, and that the Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. And those who are able to hear the Good Shepherd’s voice are those who find their meaning in that story – which is to say those who need, and *know that they need*, to be served by mercy and loved into wholeness. In other words, those who need, and *know that they need*, a Savior.

Who are they? Who can hear the Shepherd’s voice? Well, wonderfully, in the story of God’s love, the *deaf* hear. And the *blind* see. And the *lame* walk and follow their Shepherd into eternal life.

“Are you the Christ – tell us plainly.” The madding crowd wants a fixer, but the sheep need a Savior. The crowd wants optimism, but the sheep need hope. The crowd wants a good plan, but the sheep need Good News.

They came to Jesus then, and we come today, with questions: Why that car accident; why that cancer; why this economic crash; why this loneliness; why that betrayal; why that earthquake? *Oh, God - tell me plainly*.

But God loves us more, and better, than words can say. And so the answer to our questions is not an abstract syllogism of theological reasoning, and it is not some deep-sounding but vague hooey about the mysterious course of God’s goodness in the world, though we can trust God finally to bring good from evil.

The answer, and the only answer that can speak to our hearts, is the story of God’s love in Christ: that loving his own, he loved them – he loved us, you and me – to the end; that he delivers himself into the hands of sinful men – to us, you and me – to be crucified; that the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, and – Alleluia! – takes it back up again, and takes up our lives – mine and yours and every one of his sheep – with and in his, the whole story.

We come to this Altar with questions – *Oh God, tell me plainly*. Well, here is his body broken, and here is his blood poured out, for you and for me. And here is the plain truth of God’s love: *The Lamb in the midst of the throne is our Shepherd, and he will guide us to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes*.

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