

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Our Scripture passage comes from the Gospel of John 10:27–30. This reading is only a few verses long but has great meaning for our lives of discipleship. In these verses, Jesus speaks to us as the Good Shepherd and instructs us on some essential responsibilities we must fulfill in order to remain faithful members of His flock.

In order to understand this section of John's Gospel, we have to remember that this scene occurs during the Feast of Dedication while Jesus is in Jerusalem (see Jn 10:22). On this Feast, the Jews celebrated and commemorated the re-dedication of the Temple in 164 BC following the desecration of the Temple by the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes in the year 167 BC. This Feast was an occasion when people called to mind certain themes related to both the experiences of desecration and re-consecration: God's presence, God's Protection, and what it meant to be faithful as God's people.

It is in this festive context that Jesus reveals Himself as the "Good Shepherd" and offers His instruction on discipleship. For the Jews of Jesus time, the Temple in Jerusalem was the sign of God's enduring presence and protection. To be faithful was understood in terms of adherence to the Law of Moses.

In this passage, Jesus is revealing Himself as the one who perfects the Temple and the Mosaic Law. Just as the Temple was the place where people believed the divine presence dwelt among them, so now Jesus is the sign of God's presence *par excellence* (see Jn 10:30 where Jesus says, "The Father and I are one."). Just as the people looked to the Law of Moses and the Prophets for instruction in their faith and revelation of God's will, now His words are given to us as divine instruction for our lives and decisions (see Jn 10:27 where Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice ... and they follow me."). Lastly, just as God protected His faithful people, so Jesus offers eternal protection for those who belong to Him as His disciples (see Jn 10:28–29 where Jesus says, "They shall never perish. No one can take them out of the Father's hand.") These are all very important identifications of Jesus that show how our Lord now embodies in Himself the various elements celebrated during the Feast of Dedication. All of these points have implications for us just as much as they did for the people of Jerusalem two thousand years ago.

Sometimes it's easy to seek protection and security in materialism, relationships, ideology, or personal gratification but Jesus offers us His Word instead so that we can "hear" Him and allow Him to be our protection and strength.

What is the source of your protection when life becomes difficult?

When do you hear most clearly the voice of Jesus inviting you to place your trust in Him rather than in superficial or passing sources of stability and protection?

What are distractions or obstacles to hearing our Lord that can prevent people from listening to Him?

When have you had to rely only on the Lord for your stability and protection and what was that like?

In what ways can a faith community be tempted to rely on false senses of protection other

than Jesus?

Jesus says that it takes more than just hearing Him to be a disciple. He also says that His sheep follow Him. This teaching means that we must integrate into our lives the faith we believe and profess. It also means that we must foster a prayerful disposition that allows us to remain attune to the Lord's voice throughout our day so that all our decisions, thoughts and actions may be directed by His divine will.

It is always important to remember that John's Gospel never uses the word "faith" as a noun but only as a verb. That's because John doesn't want our experience of faith to ever become just a static set of intellectual precepts. Rather, he wants us to remember that faith does something; it is an active dynamic that is powerful in our lives. Faith is something that is lived out in our following and not only in our hearing.

Our secular culture prefers that we keep faith private and personal — more like an interior feeling than a lived conviction. That cultural expectation means that we can experience a subtle but real pressure to not put our faith into action lest we be labeled as fanatics or dangerous. Even something as simple as making the Sign of the Cross in a restaurant can evoke a hostile glance.

When do you find it difficult to follow what the Lord is saying to you?

Who exemplifies for you what it means to live out their faith?

Remember, the promise of Jesus' protection is based on the condition that we are following Him and not just thinking about Him. How can people today presume God's protection without seeking to follow God's will? How does this conditional aspect of Jesus' protection challenge you to reconsider your discipleship?

What happens when someone presumes that Jesus' promise of protection is absolute and assured regardless of whether or not they follow the Lord?

When Jesus says, "The Father and I are one," He means that everything He does is in perfect communion with the Father. We find that easy to believe when He does nice, appealing, and pleasant works of forgiveness and mercy. However, His teaching can be more difficult to believe when our Lord suffers, dies, and is abandoned by those closest to Him. Following Jesus means that we allow Him to accomplish His work through us so that we share in the communion He experiences with the Father. The goal of the Christian life is to be one with Him and become a living part of His relationship of abiding life and love.

What do you find personally appealing about the life of Jesus that inspires you to desire that communion of life and love He experiences with the Father?

What is the work God wants to do through you in your family, community, or office?

What work of Jesus do you find most difficult to carry out?

What practices help you to live your day in an enduring communion with Jesus?

Jesus says in this passage that no one can “take them out of my hand.” When He does so, He uses the same word previously used in reference to the wolf that catches and scatters the sheep (see Jn 10:12). By using this image, Jesus is teaching us that we are safe only when we choose to dwell in the palm of His hand. Consequently, we put ourselves in danger whenever we freely choose to wander away from our Lord’s protective presence. God doesn’t force us to remain in His care. It is up to us every day to choose to place our lives in God’s hands.

It can be consoling for us to think of all the ways in which God needs to care for us. However, it can be unsettling to think of how we need to conform our lives to God’s will so as to remain in the Lord’s protective care. This passage reminds us that we are not passive recipients of the Lord’s protection but are active agents in placing ourselves under His care. We all want to experience divine protection but we don’t always want to do what it takes to warrant that protection.

How can people today wander away from God’s protective presence and so put themselves at risk of being snatched away as a result?

How can you keep yourself in God’s protective presence throughout the day?

How can you keep your family and friends in God’s protective care?

Who is someone you know of that has wandered away from Jesus’ protective care and what can you do to help lead them back to the Lord?

The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd who cares for His flock was commonly used in Early Christian iconography. It appears in the Catacombs (for example, the Catacombs of Priscilla) where the Good Shepherd leads His faithful sheep to eternal life. The image also appears in the early basilicas of Rome where Jesus is represented as the Lamb of God calling the flock to Himself.

It is this second image of Jesus calling the flock to Himself and forming the Church that is instructive for us as we study this passage. This image is usually depicted in the apse of a basilica and typically shows six lambs coming from Jerusalem and six lambs coming from Bethlehem in order to be united in the one flock of the Lord (see the Basilica of San Clemente and Sts. Cosmas and Damian as examples). Jerusalem represents the city of the Jews while Bethlehem represents the city of the Gentiles. Thus, the Church is formed from Jews and Gentiles who leave behind their former ways of life in order to become a new reality as members of God’s flock, the Christian people. This image was particularly instructive for the early Christians because it reminded them that following Jesus meant leaving behind their prior way of life and being converted to a new life in Christ.

Sometimes we can think that God exists to make our lives better the way they are rather than calling us to conversion, transformation and change. When we have such a mistaken understanding of faith then we pray only for God to take away our difficulties and solve our problems. When we correctly understand that Jesus is calling us to conversion, and we hear that

call with loving obedience, then we begin to pray for insight, courage, and opportunities to demonstrate our love for God even as God has already shown His great love for us. That is a prayer God never leaves unanswered! Indeed, the Lord will lead us as long as we desire to follow. It is when we desire to remain the way we are that we become deaf to the Lord's voice leading us and inspiring us. In our spiritual deafness, we also become susceptible to the destructive forces that seek to alienate us from the life of grace to which Jesus invite us. In such a state of spiritual deafness, we are even more susceptible to be snatched away from Christ.

How does this image of early Christian art inspire and instruct your faith life?

When do you find yourself praying only for God to make your life more comfortable the way you are rather than praying for conversion, transformation, and change?

What part of your life do you need to leave behind in order to be drawn more closely to Jesus the Lamb of God?