

4th Sunday of Easter, A Shepherd's Love

My brothers and sisters, one of the most fascinating place in Rome, is the Catacomb of St. Calistus. I have been there a number times. There are a number of ancient frescoes on the high walls of the catacomb, where early Christians would come to celebrate the Eucharist. One of the most beautiful is the image of a young man hold a lamb on his shoulders. It is of course, the image of the Good Shepherd!

One of the most frequent images of the Old Testament, is the Image of God as the Shepherd of His Flock, Israel! When Jesus calls Himself the Sheep gate, the people who were listening to His teaching and the other images He uses, would have been innately aware of these images and their meaning, especially the people from rural areas of Ancient Israel!

Every boy in the village would help to herd the family's herd of sheep. The safety of the sheep was absolutely essential for the well- being of the family, providing wool, milk for cheese, and on very rare occasions, meat. At the beginning of the day, the boys would take their family's flock out of the sheep- pen to graze them in the best grass. At the end of the day, the boys would herd their flocks back into the sheepfold, usually made up of stacked Acacia thorn branches, which was a natural form of barbed wire. One of the teenagers would actually sleep at the entrance of the pen, with a fire, to deter the wild dogs, jackals and lions that still existed in the wilderness. Only thieves and robbers would tear down the pen rather than going through the entrance! Thus, the sheep- gate was a symbol of protection and care.

Furthermore, each small flock was accustomed to the unique call of their boy's voice, and would willing follow them out of the pen. I actually saw this happen with a flock of sheep in the Snowy Range. Sheep need a lot of protection and care. We have actually bred them to be radically dependent upon us! When Jesus calls Himself the "sheep- gate"; what is He saying to us?

First, Jesus has constructed a safe place, a sheep-fold of safety, protecting us from the ravages of the wolves dressed in sheep's clothing, that want to destroy

His beloved flock; whether it is in the form of false teachings, or the lure of the secular world around us. The Good Shephard provides for His beloved flock through the Proclamation of the Word of Truth and through the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation- Confession! It is Jesus, the Good Shepherd who gives His Church, His flock, the Wisdom of God in His Word and Teaching, and Who gives the Sacraments their Divine Power! It is Jesus the Divine Word and Divine Life, who has come so that we may have His Life and have it in His fullness! There can only be one response from us who belong to His flock, remain with Him, because He alone knows the Way into the Truth and the Life!