

“The age of the sheep” John 10:11-18

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing 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 the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”

Now let's go to this Sunday's topic. This Sunday is called “Good Shepherd” Sunday in our Church calendar. So we have for our meditations this section from the gospel according John, where Jesus speaks about Himself as about the Good Shepherd.

There are two things we will try to clarify about this metaphor of ‘the good shepherd’. First, we'll talk about the sheep. Second, we'll talk about the shepherd.

Let's talk about the sheep first. I am sure you all know much more about the sheep than I do. So you can easily describe what the sheep are like. They are smart, independent, discerning, autonomous creatures.

They can easily make up their minds and come to the right decisions. Then clearly know right from wrong. They can take care of themselves. They can see their enemies coming and can protect themselves.

They are such wonderful creatures, the pinnacle of God's creation. We are talking about the sheep, right? So, is this a correct description of what the sheep are like? Yes? No? Of course not, of course not.

When we think about this metaphor of the Good Shepherd, shouldn't we ask a question – why did Jesus compare us, people, with the sheep? What was His reasoning? What point was He making?

It is rather obvious. Isn't it? He compared us with the sheep, because it is a very fitting metaphor. We are like the sheep. Without a shepherd we are lost. We go where others go, without much consideration, without much understanding.

But is this how people think about themselves? Is this how we think about ourselves? No, not at all. Not in this age. I think that we live in the age of the

sheep. In the age when the sheep rule. When the sheep don't need shepherds anymore.

For this is exactly what we can learn from our society. Everyone is so smart. Everyone is so autonomous. Everyone can make up their own mind about what is right and what is wrong. Everyone is so discerning.

We can say that these days every sheep is fully qualified to be its own shepherd. To lead themselves where they want to go, and to protect themselves if there are any dangers.

Everyone can do what is right in their own eyes and there is no need for the Good Shepherd. Do you think that we are immune to this in the Church? No, we are not. We also have got this bug of 'everyone does what is good in their own eyes'.

We can see it when it comes to our relationships with our Creator and Redeemer. When we see this attitude that we can come to God where and how we decide. He has to accommodate us, if He wants us to worship Him at all. We rule...

We can see it when it comes to our lives, to the most important relationships, - marriage and family. Everyone does what is good in their own eyes. How many are looking for God's guidelines? You tell me...

How many think about their sexuality as God's gift given for their marriage? How many are simply following where the culture leads? You know the answer. We also know where this has lead our society and the Church.

It would be difficult to find a family where someone hasn't been hurt in their the most important relationships. But why would we learn, why would we listen to the Good Shepherd... we are the sheep and we rule...

There really isn't much that we could offer our Lord – our blindness, our foolishness, our rebellious ambitions and our lack of gratitude for everything that we daily receive from Him.

I want to read for you a quote from Richard Paul. He is the founder of movement for Critical Thinking. That's what he does, he thinks. He is not a Christian as far as I know, but his description of our times is brilliant.

"As creatures in the world we are best defined not as 'the rational' but as the self-deceiving animal". We consistently deceive ourselves about the state of and the degree of our knowledge and our freedom.

We confuse our fervent beliefs with knowledge or proof, our judgmentalism with judgement, our point of view with reality. We confuse facts with opinions, data and interpretation, evidence and conclusion. We do all this with ease, with skill, both individually and collectively. [It applies to us as well.]

We believe that we are reasonable. At the same time whatever is commonly believed is taken by most to be self-evidently true. So when schools teach what is commonly believed, they are taken to be teaching the truth. If they were to teach what flies in the face of common belief they would be taken to be biased and narrow. [It applies to us as well.]

‘Having knowledge’ is reduced to believing what those around us believe. ‘Being free’ is reduced to acting as we would like to act, which turns out suspiciously similar to acting as those around us act.” [We all want to believe that we are objective and reasonable, while in fact so often we are led by irrationality and collective self-delusion.]

It is sad when it happens in the world. But it is much worse when it happens in the Church. The world doesn’t have God wisdom, we have it. At least it is available to us. The world doesn’t have the Good Shepherd, we have Him.

The world can’t stand on a firm foundation and evaluate from the Creator’s perspective what is right and what is wrong. But we can. We have God’s own revelation, His own teachings.

That’s why it is so sad when the Church become like the world, like the sheep who think they can be their own shepherds. It is sad when we try to mask our unwillingness to stand up for God’s truth saying that we do it for the sake of love.

So, we become like the world around us, we accept the ways of the world, we begin to imitate the world, turning away from our Lord, and all of this - for the sake of love? What a lame excuse...

What has happened to ‘you are the salt of the earth and the city on the hill’? What has happened to ‘if you see brother sinning, go and tell him, and if he listens, you will have saved him’?

This is the age of the sheep, when less and less are willing to listen to their Good Shepherd. But in reality there are only two choices. To be with the Good Shepherd or to be left with wolves. It is that simply. Either...or... There is no middle ground.

But wolves don’t care about the sheep. They care only about themselves. For them the sheep is only a prey. And in this age when the sheep have believed that they themselves can rule, they are left vulnerable and unprotected in hands of wolves.

Only the Good Shepherd can protect them. So let’s talk about this Good Shepherd, about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. First we need to re-thing this image of the Good Shepherd. He is often portrayed as this nice, loving guy, holding little lambs on his laps.

This is not a biblical understanding of the Good Shepherd. Being a shepherd was hard and risky job. We can read how the king David described his life as a shepherd.

“I used to keep sheep for his father. And when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth. And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him.” (1Sa 17:34-35)

Through the prophet Ezekiel God Himself said: “I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep.” (Ez. 34:15) Through the prophet Isaiah God announced:

“Behold, the Lord Yahweh comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms.” (Isa 40:10-11)

The Good Shepherd is not a some nice guy. He is the ruler of the Universe, He is the Lord Almighty Himself. He is fully capable of protecting you from any enemy. Even from our ultimate enemy – death.

He can make you wise for salvation and for this life, He can teach you to see what your enemies are, if only you listen to Him carefully. Besides, think about His commitment to you. He is ready to lay down His life to protect you. This is the definition of the Good Shepherd. Powerful and faithful.

It means the you, that your life, for Him is more important than His own. And listen to these words: “I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.”

This is more than we could imagine. In the Bible ‘to know’ means much more than simply knowing something. In the Bible ‘to know’ means to know truly, deeply intimately, closely. Marital relationships are described as knowing one another.

This is what Jesus speaks about. He knows you and He allows you to know Him. This knowing is similar to the love between the Father and Jesus. Unconditional, self-sacrificial love, which enables one to lay down his life.

If you are from Jesus’ sheep, then you also know Him. What does it mean? It means that you know Him as He is. His true nature. That you know Him both as the almighty God, your rock and shield.

And at the same time, as one who comes to you in the Divine Service, to forgive you your rebellion against Him, to purify your soul, to speak to you His love, to feed you with His holy and precious body and blood. God for you. Your God.

The Father has given us freedom that is almost scary. You can say ‘no’ to the Good Shepherd, and chose to listen to wolves. For this really either ... or... . Either the Shepherd, or wolves.

If we don’t want Jesus Christ as our shepherd, we’ll be without Him. We have the freedom to reject Him. We can go ahead in our life as the sheep which know better. We are free to do whatever we want... to be led by whomever we chose, and do whatever our hearts may desire.

We just need to remember that Jesus Christ paid with His life to acquire you. He will never, never give up on you or forsake you. But if you chose to live without Him here, you will stand alone, completely on your own, on the day when we all will give our account to the Creator.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, be wise, be realistic about what the sheep are capable of on their own, and what not. Listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd, come before Him with repentant heart, pray for His Spirit to open your eyes to see the truth and to purify your heart, and allow Him to take care of you, here and in the life to come. For He can and He will. Don’t try to rule, be His sheep.

Amen.