

Good shepherd / bad shepherds

John 10:1-18

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Sermon preached on the occasion of the ordination to the priesthood of David Scott Robinson

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[Jesus said]: "Truly, truly I say to you: the one who does not enter through the gate into the sheepfold but goes up another way is a thief and a plunderer. But, the one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The one who stands guard at the gate opens the gate for him. The shepherd calls to his sheep by name and leads them out. When he gets all of his own sheep out of the sheepfold, he walks on before them. The sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow another; instead, they will flee from him for they do not know the voice of others."

Jesus told this parable but they did not understand the things that he was saying to them.

So, again, Jesus said: "Truly, truly I say to you: I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and plunderers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved, and he will go in and go out and find pasture. The thief only comes to steal and to kill and to destroy. I have come that they might have life and have it in abundance.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his very life for the sheep. The hired-hand, who is not the shepherd, and whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees. The wolf snatches at the sheep and scatters them. The hired hand is just their for pay. The sheep don't really mean anything to him.

"I am the good shepherd. I know my own sheep and my own sheep know me, just as the father knows me and I know the father. I lay down my life for the sheep. But, I also have other sheep which are not found in this sheepfold. I must go and lead them here. They will hear my voice. Then there will be one flock, one shepherd. This is why my father loves me, because I lay down my life so that I can receive it back again. No one takes my life from me. I lay it down of my own accord. I have been given authority to lay it down, and I have been given authority to receive it back again. This is the decree that I have received from my father."

I think that I would be safe to assume that we all know what I mean when I say the expression: Good cop / bad cop. Some of you may even have seen a film that is about the concept.

Well, what images does it bring before you? Two detectives, hard at work, trying to find the information that will solve the crime, and hopefully prevent further crimes. They realize that, working with criminals, a "soft" approach doesn't always work, and one has to use tough measures, including violence. So, one of the detectives takes a very hard line, perhaps even roughing up the criminals a bit to get the right information, while the other detective comes in and pretends to be a friend, and looking out for the criminal's interest. 'Just tell us what you did and I'm sure that I can get the judge to go easy on you!'

How valid is this "good cop / bad cop" approach in other disciplines?

Good scientist / Bad scientist? I'll approach this experiment as a good scientist and you falsify the results of the experiment and let's see what we come up with as a result.

Good doctor / Bad doctor? I'll do a proper diagnosis and then and then you come in and do a medically reprehensible job. Let's see what kind of reaction we get.

Good judge / Bad judge? I'll act impartially and then you take over and act as if justice didn't matter. Let's see what kind of decision stands for the victims of Air India 182.

Hmm.

How about: Good shepherd / Bad shepherd?

You know the story, don't you. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God. That Word became incarnate and dwelt among us. We have beheld His glory. He performed signs that clearly indicated who He is. In doing so, He not only manifested His Father's glory, but He also showed the Father's good purposes for the whole world, which He loves. He showed His love not just for those who appeared to love Him, but for the whole world.

At one point in the story, Jesus came upon a man who had been blind from birth. He healed that man of his blindness.

You would have thought such acts would be greeted with amazement, wonder, and praise. But, no, the religious leaders, those who are supposed to care for the people of God in God's name, are suspicious. More than that, they are upset. More than that, they are furious, because Jesus has begun to show them to be unloving, weak, and foolish as leaders of the people of God. In other words, Jesus has begun to show them to be nothing more than fake shepherds to the people of Israel.

So, the leaders took this poor lamb of a man who was in their care and who had now been healed of his blindness and cross-examined him again, and again, and again. But rather than finding anything that made them look good -- which is what they really wanted -- and finding only their failures and Jesus' love, strength, and wisdom, their hearts became hard. So, instead of praising and thanking God for working wonders in this man's life through Jesus' intervention, they cursed the man who had just been healed by Jesus and threw him out of the Jewish community.

Then Jesus came to this man. Jesus hadn't stayed around long enough after the healing for the man who had been blind to see him, so the man couldn't recognize him. But, by Jesus' voice and what Jesus said to him, the man realized that the one who was standing before him, Jesus, was the one who had healed him. Then the man worshipped Jesus. Then Jesus said: 'I came to give sight to the blind and to show those who think that they see well that they are blind.' When the Jewish leaders who had interrogated the healed man overheard this, they said to Jesus: 'You mean us?' Jesus said to them: 'Judge for yourselves.'

And then Jesus turned away from those religious leaders and spoke the words from the Gospel read to you.

Here is what Jesus says.

I am the gate for my sheep. My sheep will come in through me to their sheepfold. They are able to come and go and, when they do, they will be able to find pasture. But, they are only able to come and go, because of the gate, and I am that gate.

I am also the shepherd, Jesus says. But, I'm not just any shepherd. I'm the good shepherd. I don't just do the minimum that I'm supposed to do to be called a "shepherd". I go all the way: I defend my sheep from any enemy, even at the cost of my life.

Each time that Jesus identifies himself -- as gate, as shepherd --, he also identifies others.

I am not like those who try to get into the sheepfold to steal the sheep, and then to sell them or to kill them.

I am not like someone who is simply hired to do the job of a shepherd, someone who is in it for the money, even as a thief is in it for the money. Such a person has no strength of character or courage so that when danger is near he simply runs off.

But, who exactly are “His sheep”? And who are the thieves and plunderers who look like shepherds but who have only the appearance of being shepherds? Or the hired-hands who are just like them in that all that they’re interested in is money?

Jesus Himself tells us who “His sheep” are: they are those who hear His voice. They are not any particular ethnic group or religious group. They are not “Israel”, they are not “the Church”. They are not those who say: Well, I’ve been dipped in a sheep bath and so therefore I must be one of his. I’ve eaten the food that sheep eat, so I must be one of His.

No, He tells us right here: His sheep are those who hear and recognize His voice. Like the blind man who hadn’t seen, when he heard Jesus’ voice, he recognized it and he bowed before Jesus and gave thanks.

He also tells us that there are other sheep, others who will hear and recognize His voice, who are not yet part of the sheepfold. He must go and find them and bring them in.

Are His sheep still around today? They most certainly are. I imagine that there are many of His sheep present here today. Do you hear His voice? Do you hear Him calling you to Him, so that you can take shelter under the protection of the good shepherd? Do you feel a burning in your heart when you hear His voice, like the quickening of the heart of the beloved when she hears the lover’s voice? Do you get a thrill when you hear that He is calling you to follow Him wherever He leads you, whether it is to pasture or even to a place where there’s nowhere to lay your head, because there’s just something about Him that you trust completely and utterly and that you find exciting? Then you are one of His sheep and you know exactly what I’m talking about.

And there are other people out there, people who will also have that same burning in their hearts when they hear Jesus speak to them or they hear Jesus spoken of to them. They, too, are His sheep.

But, who are the others? those who try to get into the sheepfold by a different way, the thieves and plunderers who come to steal, and kill and destroy, those others whose voices the sheep do not recognize because they are not the shepherd’s voice -- those others who look a bit like a shepherd, probably dress the same way that a shepherd dresses, carry the same instruments of the shepherd’s work, and even know the right ‘shepherd-speak’ -- but who are really thieves, only in it for the money, hired hands who flee because they really don’t care about the sheep, fake shepherds?

We know who they were in Jesus’ day. They were the religious leadership who pretended to care for the people when all that they were interested in was a comfortable living and exercising power and authority over weak and vulnerable people. Among them were the leaders who cross-examined the man who had been healed.

They were the leaders under whose authority Israel was always suffering, the kind of leaders that the prophet Ezekiel had condemned hundreds of years earlier when he wrote:

Ho, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³ You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴ The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. ⁵ So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the wild beasts. ⁶ My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them. (Ezekiel 34:2-6)

The false shepherds were those whom God permitted to come to power, and who again and again and again lost sight of what God had called them to do. Whether it was in the form of hypocritical priests, like the sons of Eli, or false prophets, like those who sold themselves to Baal during the failed reign of false shepherds like king Ahab and Queen Jezebel, or the false messiahs of Jesus' own day, these shepherds were given authority to lead the people, but they stopped seeking after God and became enamored of comfortable living and power. And the result was always the same: where shepherds began to care more for themselves than for God and their flock, heresy and anarchy reigned and the flock perished. Shockingly, it happened even under the leadership of those shepherds who started out so well, who were even called "shepherds" in Scripture, Moses and David. In the end, self-interest consumed both of them, and so one was not allowed to enter the promised land and the other knew that his kingdom would eventually be divided and conquered. And so Jesus says: all the shepherds that have come before me have failed to be good shepherds.

But, surely, this is all behind us now. Or is it?

Let me answer this question and also explain how much all of this has to do with the ordination of David Robinson to the sacred order of priest in Christ's Holy Catholic Church?

You know who Jesus is. As the incarnate Son of God, He reigns here today and is with us by the power of His Holy Spirit, then, now and forever, one with God the Father.

And you know that He is the Good Shepherd, looking after His sheep that are gathered and gathering others who have not yet been brought in.

But, a priest in Christ's Holy Catholic Church is also a shepherd, as you will hear in just a moment. A priest is a "pastor", a shepherd, to the flock that God has entrusted to him in order that he shepherd the sheep who belong to the Lord Jesus Christ because they have been purchased by the Lord Jesus Christ through His blood. This is why His sheep hear His voice and their heart leaps: because they are his.

But a priest is not the shepherd. A priest is not there to replace Jesus. He is there to act on Jesus' behalf, authorized by a decree from God, to care for the flock for which Jesus has died and to which that same Jesus is now daily giving new life through His own risen life. The shepherd of that flock feeds the flock with the body and blood of that same Lord Jesus Christ. And so it is that the priest is identified most clearly as priest with the meal at which he presides, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, in which we proclaim Jesus' death on our behalf until He comes again.

But not only can no priest can ever shepherd the flock as the Good Shepherd does. Every priest is also always and inevitably, on the same course as the shepherds of Israel toward becoming false shepherds. This happens as priests lose their focus on God and then a desire for a comfortable life and power creep in and take residence in their hearts. In some churches and in some denominations, false shepherds begin to increase to such an extent that heresy and anarchy become the norm, even as they did in ancient Israel. This still happens in our day and we are witnesses to it.

So, what hope is there then for us who are priests? Who will save us from ourselves!? David, this is crucial for you to know.

There is but one shepherd and one flock. Your job is to make the Good Shepherd known to the flock. A priest who confesses his weakness, his inability to be a shepherd in his own strength, a priest who confesses that he can never love the unlovely enough, a priest who confesses that he is never wise enough to understand God's purposes... in other words, a priest who throws himself daily at the feet of the Good Shepherd himself and worships him and asks the Good Shepherd to cover his many faults and to use him for the Good Shepherd's own purposes, not his own.... that priest, that shepherd, will be doing his job because he will show his flock that he is not their shepherd, the Good Shepherd Himself is!

How can you do this? Only by following our Lord Jesus as He commanded: take up your cross daily, and follow me.

Contrary to what some of you may have expected, or even hoped, John's Gospel does not end with a showdown with the bad shepherds. In our human understanding, we might have thought that John would end with that

conclusion, that the bad shepherds would be defeated, maybe even die, and that their death would rid us of sin and the problem would be resolved. So much energy has been wasted on people trying to make the story turn out that way, by continuing to fight the bad shepherds even in our day.

But, John's Gospel reveals the truly divine wisdom of God, not human understanding... thankfully! No, it is not the bad shepherds of Jesus' day who die, but rather the Good Shepherd Himself who dies, who lays down his life for His sheep. Why? Because the Son of God came into the world not to condemn the world but to give life to the world. The false shepherds will be destroyed and die at their own hand, as heresy and anarchy slowly and inevitably strangle them in cords of their own making. No, the Good Shepherd died not simply to free His sheep from their power. He died to free His sheep from the power of sin, and evil, and death, by taking upon Himself and into the deepest recesses of Hell all the ills of His sheep. And He was raised from death to give them a life, a peace, and a joy that no one would ever take away and that are replenished daily as they go out and come in through Him, died and risen.

A priest in Christ's Holy Catholic Church, given the decree from God to tend the flock in the name and authority of the Good Shepherd, dies daily to himself so that the flock is left seeing only Jesus, the Good Shepherd, high and lifted up. Then there will be but one shepherd and one flock.

David, there is still time to turn back. If this seems too much to you, then it would be better to do so now than later. You do not want to be ordained or consecrated to a position to which you will then later say as the false shepherds say: No, I prefer another path. This one is too difficult. I didn't know what it involved. I prefer to live my life as I want to.

But, David, I pray you won't turn back. And, from what I know of you, I know that you won't.

We will all pray for you as you die daily, and as you do, allowing the Good Shepherd to be seen through you.

And we who are priests, will be glad to count you among us to help remind us that it is to the Good Shepherd alone to Whom all glory belongs and that at the end of the day we have only done that which he has desired of us, dying in His service that He be known to His sheep.