

The Good Shepherd and Other Shepherds

Intro. Any real sheep herders here? All I know about shepherds is what I have read. Shepherds often live with the sheep, moving them from one pasture to another; rounding them up when they stray; keeping predators like wolves away. The shepherd is not *always* the owner of the sheep; he or she often hires a shepherd for pay and when the gets difficult they are gone.

I. In biblical times sheep herding was usually a group operation – parents, their children and grandchildren. Everyone lived in the field or the hills and constantly moved to find good grazing and water. This was the image most familiar to the Lord’s listeners.

In most parts of the world including our country, it was and is often a solitary life once lambing season in the Spring is over, until shearing season in the Fall. A shepherd and a good sheep dog live for weeks in wide open places, far from other people and towns. The only person the shepherd might see is the one who brings her or him supplies of food periodically. The work can be tedious and dangerous. Shepherds have been known to go crazy due to the loneliness while others enjoy it. It takes a lot of commitment and a lot of dedication. For true shepherds the rewards are worth it.

Since this is not a familiar image for most of us today, I think we have to find another. Leaders are shepherds of those entrusted to their care. Good leaders make sure there is enough food for the body and the mind; that living and working conditions are

optimal for accomplishing the goals of the group. They make sure all feel safe and cared for, not mistreated or ignored. We know from work and school experience that *not* all leaders are shepherds. Some misuse their authority; “give minimal effort to the job, pursue their own agenda” [*Exploring the Sunday Readings*, Twenty-third Publications, Vol. 27, Number 7] and run away from responsibility. Honesty says we must admit *we* are not always good leaders or shepherds. We have *our* “wolf” parts that get in the way of leading others to the common good and to the Lord. There are many “wolves” running loose in our world. Greed, exploitation of the less powerful, prejudice and bias, anger, addiction. They threaten to take us down.

Concl. Who shepherds *us* amid these dangers? It can be family or friends or teachers or pastors or the

church community and of course, the Lord. The good shepherd can be all of the above, and sometimes it *takes all of the above* to bring us back to ourselves and to the Lord. Occasionally being a good leader/shepherd means laying down one’s life for another. One example given in our bible study this week is the French policeman who recently traded himself for a hostage. That is a good *leader*. He ultimately gave his life saving others. **That** is a *good shepherd*. In the biblical image, the Lord is both the owner and shepherd of the flock. No one takes better care of the “flock” than the one who has the most interest in us. The Lord is the true Good Shepherd. We have a decision to make every day: are we shepherds or just hired men and women?