

4th Sunday of Easter: Homily – Fr Denis O'Bryan

On this Sunday every year the Gospel at Mass speaks of Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

As we know from Psalm 23 which we have prayed at Mass today and which was composed many hundreds of years before Jesus was born, the image of God as a shepherd for his people was one with which the Jewish people in the time of Jesus were very familiar. It is also a favourite psalm for many of us.

When Jesus brought miracles of healing to the lives of poor and ordinary people the word spread like wildfire through the villages in the countryside, prompting thousands of people to leave their homes and villages to seek for Jesus.

On one occasion when Jesus was surrounded by thousands of people at one time, all seeking relief, he looked upon them with great love and compassion, and described them as like sheep without a shepherd. He immediately began to shepherd them with teaching and healing, bringing God's mercy to them when they begged for forgiveness, and bringing peace to their lives by powerfully overcoming the demons that were tormenting them.

Jesus described himself as the Good Shepherd who knows and loves his sheep and will lay down his life for them. He will never abandon his sheep in times of danger. He speaks to them; they know his voice; they follow him with absolute trust. If they are scattered or lost Jesus promises that he will seek them out, find them, and carry them home with great joy in his heart.

Today's Gospel speaks of the shepherd and his sheep huddled closely together in the sheepfold. This is where they are gathered for safety in times of danger and through the long dark hours of night. There is only one narrow way in and out of the sheepfold and the shepherd sits in that space. The shepherd is the gate of the sheepfold, protecting the sheep with his life, and guarding them from all the lurking dangers. It is the image that Jesus applies to himself. It's a very intimate scene, the sheep and the shepherd always close together. Jesus assures us that his deepest desire for us is not just to be safe but to have fullness of life, a fullness that comes through our loving relationship with him.

When we with think of it there is no real sense in trying to imagine a shepherd without his sheep, or sheep without a shepherd.

In our church today the task of being shepherds is entrusted by Jesus to bishops and priests. They called pastors. Pope Francis is famous for saying that bishops and priests should know and carry with them the smell of the sheep. We are called to be close to and to know our people.

This Sunday once again at St Thomas the Apostle Church we cannot gather for our public Mass. I know you are missing being together with one another at Mass, and I am very much missing being together with you.

This Sunday is the last one before our bishop, Patrick O'Regan leaves for Adelaide to be come Archbishop there. We will once again not have a bishop.

This Sunday all over the world we are asked to pray for vocations especially to the priesthood and religious life. Sheep need shepherds.

So, we pray for all involved in the process of selecting our next bishop. We pray with gratitude for the blessings of the past five years with Archbishop-elect Patrick O'Regan as our bishop. We pray for the seminarians of our diocese, three of whom are deacons preparing to be ordained as priests. We pray that God will continue to call young people from our parishes and families to be priests, deacons and religious, good shepherds for God's people, and that he will empower them to say "yes" when they are called. We pray for our priests and deacons and religious in this time of disruption that Jesus be close to them in their need and enable them to be true shepherds for his disciples.

As we are confined to our homes at this time it is important to remember that by our Baptism and participation in the Eucharist, we all share in the life of Jesus. We are all called to be good shepherds for those who are close to us. All in our families are called to be good shepherds to one another. God desires you to have fullness of life in your families.

Families, I invite you, after this Mass, to hold one another close in a loving embrace. Be merciful and forgive one another, speak God's words to one another, be kind and gentle with one another, pray for one another, and above all love one another.

Stay together for some moments in a close and loving embrace. Pour out the love in your hearts for one another; pour out the love of Jesus which is in your heart for one another; pour out the Holy Spirit, God's living and powerful flame of love, for one another.

Please remember to pray for those who, during this time are living alone.

And please pray for me too, as I pray for you.