



4th Week of Easter: 25th/ 26th April 2021

Vocations Sunday

Reflection / Homily – Mgr Daniel McHugh

“The Good Shepherd has risen, who laid down His life for His sheep”

The catacombs of Rome are places of Pilgrimage today, but in the early centuries of the Christian era they were underground places of burial for those who were martyred for the Faith. Gradually the tombs had different frescoes/paintings and the favourite was of the “Good Shepherd”, the image Jesus uses to describe himself in the Gospel for the Fourth Sunday of Easter.

When I was a student in Rome an annual Pilgrimage to the catacombs for the whole student body was a tradition; Mass was celebrated in the small oratory where the dead were bought before burial.

That image of the Good Shepherd continues to appeal and, even those who do not have a worshipping Christian Faith are inclined to choose the Psalm, The Lords my Shepherd, to be sung or said at their Funeral.

It is significant then that the Sunday on which this Parable is read has become Vocations Sunday, the Day on which the Church prays for Vocations to the Priesthood. Already, as a teenager, I knew people needed to know Jesus if they were to find true happiness in life. Now as I read the Gospel I know that the image Jesus painted of Himself was about how much He cared about people.

Father Pollard, a Jesuit, has a series of Homilies called “Finding Fresh Light”, and in this Gospel passage he reflects on the Good Shepherd and His love for His people, many of whom are lonely and do not know “his voice or lean on his love”. He writes: “it is sad to see them ‘the crowds without company’ – a phrase from Edward Gibbon – seeking in drink and drugs and lost weekends for some form of “replacement shepherding that will ease their spiritual emptiness and anchor their loneliness”. He goes on “There’s tragedy in this contemporary scene of the ‘crowds without company’ on one side of the street of life and Jesus, longing for their company, on the other side”. And, he quotes Barclay, the scripture scholar’s commentary on this: “This is the picture Jesus drew of God! But, it is even more so the picture Jesus drew of himself”. Jesus says in this Sunday’s Gospel “I am the Good Shepherd...I lay down my life for my sheep.” But He goes on to say “my Father loves me because I lay down my life to take it up again.” Important as dying is, it is not the end of the story: we continue the Eastertide theme of rising to new life.

It is the vision of handing on this good news that is at the heart of every true priestly vocation. How we do it is another thing: clearly it has to be underpinned by a selfless love of Jesus. That is what comes across in the preaching of St Peter on this Vocations’ Sunday. We read in the Acts of the Apostles: “Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, addressed

Monsignor Daniel McHugh

Co-ordinator for Ethnic Chaplaincies in the Archdiocese



them (the Rulers, Elders and Scribes) saying of Jesus Risen from the Dead: “This is the stone rejected by you the builders, but has proved to be the key stone. For of all the names in the world given to men, this is the only one by which we can be saved.”

Peter is prepared to give all for Jesus, and, of course, he did, dying a martyr’s death. It is that type of Vocation we are praying for when we pray for Vocations to Priesthood this Sunday.

Evidently, we need others to play a part in proclaiming the truth of Jesus too, if we are to reach a fraction of the “crowd that pass by on the other side of the street.” One such is the Catechist; such an important ministry in the Church today, they are called and tasked with sharing knowledge and understanding of our Faith to young and old alike. This vocation has been highlighted in the new International Catechetical Directory being presented in the Diocese at this time. We pray that more may hear the call to Priesthood, but also pray that our Faithful people will hear the call to other ministries too, such as Catechist, Permanent Diaconate and Consecrated life. In my recent Podcast I speak of the Vocation of Marriage: now that is, I dare to say, a keystone, humanly speaking, to many other Vocations today.

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