

4th Sunday of Easter Year A – Good Shepherd Sunday.

“I am the gate. Anyone who enters through me will be safe: he will go freely in and out and be sure of finding pasture.”

Today’s image is a familiar one – Jesus the Good Shepherd – and it is a beautiful image for us to keep in our mind. But as I have reflected on today’s readings I have been struck by these words;

“Anyone who enters through me will be safe: he will go freely in and out and be sure of finding pasture.”

Having found Jesus; having found safe pasture and been “let in” by him – why would anyone want to go out? And why would Jesus be the way out?

Two weeks ago some of us gathered for a thanksgiving Mass at the Cathedral as we said goodbye to Bishop Malcolm before he left for Liverpool. I have had a real sense of loss, of sadness now that he has gone. He has been in my thoughts and prayers a lot over the past few days. He has been our faithful Shepherd for over 13 years.

As I have prayed about the Gospel reading today I have been reminded of his words spoken 6 years ago at the Mass of Dedication of the (then) new St Charles Church. They made a deep impression on me that night and Bishop Malcolm was echoing the words of Jesus we hear today;

“...he will go freely in and out and be sure of finding pasture.”

He talked about how delighted he was to dedicate the new church and what a lovely building it is. But he said that the Church is not just a building; he warned us not to be insular. As Christians we gather together to celebrate the Eucharist but then we must be outward looking.

Jesus is the gate of the sheepfold. He lets us in but he also leads us out into new pastures - pastures that are fresh and green. Not long after my ordination Bishop Malcolm told me how important the words of dismissal are (spoken by me as a Deacon) at the end of Mass (and Fr Colin talked about this last week).

We should not just gather for Mass and afterwards go back to our everyday business. We are missionaries and after Mass, after receiving Jesus in the Eucharist, we are sent out to proclaim the Good News. We are called to;

“Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.”

We need to resist the temptation just to retreat into ourselves – to avoid reaching out to new friends. We cannot just be content with our comfortable life; our comfortable ways; our comfortable friends. Jesus sends us out from the safety of our familiar world – to conquer a new world for him.

Frightening and even dangerous this may be; but our Good Shepherd comes with us. He guides us along the right path. He fills us with his goodness and kindness and he promises us that ultimately we will dwell in his house for ever and ever.

Every year on Good Shepherd Sunday we are called to pray especially for vocations to the priesthood, diaconate and religious life. Again I have reflected on words spoken by Bishop Malcolm.

At the ordination of Fr Neil Peoples last year he talked very movingly about the priesthood. He talked about it being a truly fulfilling and happy life.

We all have a vocation and have been called by God. Some of us will have been called to be husbands, wives, mothers and fathers. Some of us doctors, nurses, teachers and others to work in shops and factories. All of us will be doing God's will if we do our job to the best of our abilities and, (as St Charles once preached) if we *"let all that we do be done in love"*.

But some of us will be called by God to the priesthood or religious life. God's call can sometimes be with a sudden blinding revelation like St Paul's experience on the road to Damascus but more often than not, it will be a gradual awareness and awakening. This needs to be fed by our prayers and the Holy Spirit. Someone in this church today may be being called by God to the priesthood or religious life. It may be the person sitting next to you....or it may even be you!

How would we react if our son, daughter or friend told us they thought God was calling them to the priesthood or religious life? Would our reaction be positive or negative? In today's climate it takes great courage to even mention a religious vocation. Do we play a part in this? When others criticise and mock the Church and priesthood do we defend it as a precious gift from God?

Do we support and pray for those in seminaries and those already ordained? Do we tell our priests how much we value them and appreciate their daily sacrifice?

That person sitting next to you may be struggling with their calling and may be longing for a kind word of encouragement. If we think some young (or not so young) person would make a lovely priest, nun or deacon, do we tell them? Our simple words may be just the affirmation they desperately need and have been praying for.

So let us keep praying and ask Jesus the Good Shepherd to fill us with his Holy Spirit and give us the courage to be guided by him.

When we do this we will truly understand Jesus' words today;

"I have come so that they may have life – and have it to the full."