

Easter 4 2018

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The imagery of shepherding is found in our gospel today. It is a comforting picture for us. We often see Jesus holding a lamb on his shoulders. Jesus the Good Shepherd is one of the most comforting images in Christian iconography. Some people love this picture because it is so serene ... so reassuring.

This morning we hear comforting words from Jesus concerning being both a shepherd and a gate. The sheep know the sound of his voice. The shepherd knows each sheep so well that he can call them by name. The sheep and the shepherd know each other so well that the sheep will not follow anybody else.

There are other voices however. These are the voices of strangers who try to lead the sheep away. Jesus describes them elsewhere as thieves and bandits. They come to steal the sheep. These thieves, bandits and the wolf cannot get into the sheep, because Jesus acts as both the gate and the gatekeeper. They are offered the abundant life Jesus brings.

We also see that there are those who are dangerous in this world. They call to us constantly and they try to confuse us continually.

Some of you may know for the last two weekends I have been on a profoundly moving Easter school in Poland. We were sixteen students, all aiming for public ministry. We spent eight days and nights, in and around Auschwitz -Birkenau. We were there to study and respond to the tragedy which led to the building of a huge death camp where one million, two hundred thousand people were murdered. (Jewish people, Poles, Roma and Sinti people, Homosexuals.) We reflected on how, we as future deacons and priests, might respond to evil inflicted by human beings on others. It was a profoundly prayerful and I must admit a harrowing experience. Each one of us will never forget our time there.

During one of our sessions we were moved by a story that, I believe, describes a shepherd and a gate. This story is true.

It is about a Franciscan friar. His life exemplified the role of a caring shepherd for his flock. His life is also a gateway through which we can see the effect of the incredible love of God.

The friar's name was Maximilian Kolbe. He was born in 1894 in Poland. His parents were poor. His father was a weaver.

In 1910, he entered the Franciscan order and he was ordained a priest in Rome. On his return to Poland he built a friary, just outside Warsaw. He also spent time in Japan and India and founded friaries there as well. In 1936, he returned to be the guardian of the friary in Warsaw.

When Germany invaded Poland, he sent the friars home to protect them. He was a good shepherd to his flock.

He was imprisoned for a while. But when he was released he went back to the friary where he took in three thousand refugees. 2,000 of these refugees were Jewish.

As you can imagine the Nazis became suspicious and in 1941 they closed the friary arresting Maximilian and four other brothers. They were all transported to Auschwitz. They endured many hardships. No one had enough food. Clothing and shelter was inadequate for the cold. Maximilian was known to move among the prisoners with gentleness. At night he moved from bunk to bunk identifying himself as a priest. He listened to confessions and tried to offer consolation. He continued to be a shepherd to his flock.

Father Kolbe was beaten horribly in the camp. He pleaded with the other prisoners to forgive the persecutors, to pray for them, and to overcome their evil with good. Whenever he was beaten, he did not cry out. He prayed for them.

Can we see where Jesus has called this man? Do we see how Jesus is working in him? Even in the pain, even in the heart of incredible darkness, Jesus' light shines out as a beacon of love. This man lives the faith he believes. Yet, this story is not over.

One day someone escaped from the camp. The punishment for escape was death, not for the ones who escaped, but for ten others. For each one who tried to escape ten were chosen. After one such escape ten men were chosen at random to die by being placed in a bunker without food or water. One man of the ten cried out about his wife and family. Maximillian stepped forward. He asked to take the place of the young man who cried out. The commandant agreed.

The ten men were thrown into a dark, airless bunker and left to starve. After two weeks there were only four left alive. Maximillian Kolbe was the only one conscious. Since the camp needed the cell for more victims, the camp executioner, a doctor, injected carbolic acid into the arms of the men. Father Kolbe was the last to be injected and it was reported raised his arm to the syringe while praying.

I am not implying that Father Kolbe was the Good Shepherd as Jesus calls himself. What I am saying is that Maximillian might illustrate to us the meaning behind these words.

There are other voices calling to us in this world. Maximillian Kolbe heard those voices of evil along with every other prisoner at that concentration camp. Some people still pay heed to them today. These voices have names; violence, anger, discrimination, greed, power, corruption, and many others. Some people follow these voices and hurt themselves or hurt others. Some people will hear these voices after they themselves are hurt.

Would we be able to listen to voice of Jesus? Could we follow Jesus' way. Could we follow Jesus' example on the cross, praying for those who hurt us. "Father forgive them..." **Saint** Maximillian Kolbe heard this voice.

I will leave you with an image. On the last Friday of our visit we had a meditative walk around the vast expanse of Birkenhau to pray the 14 stations of the cross. We started at the railway platform. You would recognise it if you have seen the film Schindler's list. Here, the selection for the gas chambers was made. We reflected on the first station "Jesus is condemned to death.

We walked for two and a half hours in silence, around the vast, uneven expanse of the camp, stopping at significant places to listen to scripture and reflect on the story of the victims. At the 11th Station which commemorates Jesus being nailed to the cross we stopped in a forest next to Crematorium number 5. As we prayed and listened to the passage from scripture, two woodpeckers began a plaintive knocking. God's timing perhaps?

Yes, Jesus is the good shepherd and He is the gate for the sheep. Let's listen to his voice.

Amen