



April 25, 2010 The Fourth Sunday of Easter

“My sheep hear my Voice.” John 10:27

Dear Friends:

When I was growing up, I remember my mother telling stories of when she would spend time with her grandparents on the farm. I can remember her telling us of the different animals she loved. But the sheep she did not hold in high regard. She thought they were dirty and not very intelligent.

Most of us would hold a similar opinion of sheep. Even in our common expressions to call someone a sheep is an insult. We see sheep as symbols of mindless followers; people who fail to think and act on their own. So today's Gospel passage could be a real challenge for us to understand.

Biblical scholar, John J. Pilch, tells us in order to understand this passage from John (10:27-30) we need to understand two things about Mediterranean culture—the relationship of fathers and sons; and Mediterranean men and sheep.

Brought up exclusively by women a Mediterranean boy at the age of puberty is harshly shoved into the “the harsh and hierarchical world of men. Here he learns obedience and manliness, commonly by being taught to stoically endure physical punishment.”

John's Gospel portrays Jesus' relationship with God as the ideal Mediterranean father-son relationship. The Father knows Jesus intimately. Jesus is taught by the Father. And Jesus obeys the Father. The Father empowers Jesus to do what the Father does—he protects the sheep.

Mediterranean society is driven by the value of honor. It is the duty of a man in this society to protect and maintain his honor and those not able to do so (women, children and the weak). He must do so even to the point of death. And if he must face death he must do so honorably—that is to suffer it stoically and silently.

Mediterranean culture noticed that sheep faced their fate in just this way. When they are shorn or prepared to be slaughtered they remain silent. Isaiah (Is 53:7) has this in mind when he says that the ideal “servant of the Lord” was “like a lamb led to the slaughter or a sheep before the shearers, so he did not open his mouth.” Sheep in the Mediterranean were symbols of stoic manliness and honor.

It is out of this context that Jesus is seen as being the “lamb of God,” the paschal lamb of sacrifice. Jesus defends the honor of his Father by obediently doing the work the Father has given him—safeguarding the sheep. He obeys to the point of death with honor, not crying out or complaining. He is the shepherd who is also a sheep.

Understanding this context tells us what Jesus means when he calls us sheep. He is calling us to an intimate relationship with him. We are to obediently and honorably carry out the work that has been entrusted to us—that is to care for and shepherd each other. We must protect the least and lowliest members of the flock, we are to be life-giving and we protect them with the honor of our lives. In this sense to be called a sheep is a noble calling. It is something to which we must strive for everyday.

Peace,

Fr. Ron