

SERMON – 28 APRIL 1963

Last Sunday we called to mind the great event of our first Holy Communion, and then in connection with it we tried to discover what deeper encounter we have had with God in our lives.

The liturgy this morning continues this theme. It places before us and largely answers the question: how can we describe this God who has until now encountered us in life? How can we describe his face? What are the features of his face like? We have repeatedly asked ourselves this question, and have tried to answer it. It is now our task to discover whether and in how far this answer can validly be applied to ourselves.

The Gospel has just told us what our Savior looks like. It depicts the Good Shepherd. May we suppose that our picture of the Savior, that our picture of God bears these features? More than likely! We can say this because we are concerned here with a picture of the Savior which has been alive deep down in the Christian outlook for thousands of years. We need only think, for example, of the pictures of our Savior in the Catacombs. How often we find the picture of the Good Shepherd there! This picture is deeply embedded in the emotional life of the Christians. In this morning's Gospel our Savior described himself as the Good Shepherd. This thought goes through the entire Middle Ages and continues to exist today.

When we think of ourselves we have to admit: who of us has not seen a picture of the Good Shepherd? This may take two forms.

1 The first picture shows us our Savior clad as the Good Shepherd, with his staff in his hand and around him his flock. With what warmth the gaze of the Shepherd rests on his flock. When we look at the sheep, we notice how they crowd around him. How can we describe the way they are looking at him? It reveals the deep awareness: we are meant to be together. Yes, we, the Shepherd and his flock are meant to be together. There is a single spiritual oneness, we live spiritually in, with and for one another.

2 The second picture probably touches our hearts more closely. It shows the Good Shepherd caring for a lamb that has got stuck in a thorn bush. He turns to it with an exceedingly kind look. His hand tries to free it from the branches. It does not take long, then the lamb is free. He takes it upon his shoulders and the two are together again. With what love the Good Shepherd carries the lamb on his shoulders, and how safe it feels there - on the shoulders of the Good Shepherd, in the heart of the Good Shepherd.

These features of the Good Shepherd are also deeply embedded in our souls. These features have influenced and helped to form our picture of Christ and God. And when we look more deeply, when we ask ourselves where this secret sympathy between ourselves and the Good Shepherd comes from, we will not find it difficult to give an answer.

We all bear our burden of needing redemption, the burden of original sin and personal sin. And who is to set us free? We are the lamb that has become entangled in thorns. Who is to set us free from the bonds of our passions?

We can understand where this secret longing, this secret sympathy between ourselves and the Good Shepherd comes from. He should also redeem us and set us free. He should make it possible for us to say: Truly we are beginning to be free children of God, children of God who are free and interiorly redeemed.

When we meditate on what we have said in a very general way, we can understand that the time is now ripe for us to be shown the picture of the Good Shepherd in more detail. We do so mainly in order that this may increasingly be revealed as a reflected image.

We want to mirror ourselves in the picture of the Good Shepherd. We can then understand why we want to emphasize two thoughts:

I What is this picture like?

II If we regard this picture as our mirror, what should the reflection be like - in particular for us as parents?

I How can we describe the ideal image? We have just heard this. Our Lord himself shows us the picture. It is, therefore, his self-portrait. When we look at it more closely, we find that it depicts two things.

The first answer: Our Savior depicts himself very clearly. The second answer is given by observing his life. What he said is most important, because it represents a sharp contrast.

a On the one hand he gives us the picture of the bad shepherd. He builds on this. In contrast to this he characterizes himself in the ideal of the Good Shepherd. Where is the caricature? St John described it. We must imagine the scene. Our Lord had just healed a man born blind, and the latter fell into the hands of the Scribes and Pharisees. They wanted to force him to accuse our Savior, who had healed him, of misleading the people. However, he knew how to get out of their trap. He simply proved that he had been blind and that our Savior had healed him. We are told all this by St John. For this reason they excluded the man from the synagogue. What sort of priests were they? They were a caste of priests who did not have the good of the people or the synagogue at heart. Definitely not! It was against this background that our Savior depicted himself as though he wanted to say: Here you have a caricature of a shepherd. I, however, exemplify the ideal. And what did he reveal?

b The Good Shepherd. He emphasized three main features. He wanted to say:

(i) I am the Teacher of my people and my followers. I exercise a teaching office in my life. My sheep hear my voice. When our Savior began to speak - how often is he not shown as the teacher - they listened to his voice.

(ii) In the Gospel our Savior emphasizes that he is the Priest of his people. And the core of his teaching is contained in this: the Shepherd gives his life for his sheep.

(iii) Then the pastorate. Our Savior compares the caricature of the shepherds with the Good Shepherd. They are hired servants and run away when danger threatens. He, however, watches over his sheep, he cares for his own, even if by doing so his life is endangered.

This is the ideal of the Good Shepherd. When we look into the life of Our Lord, we do not find it difficult to see him as the Priest, the Teacher and the Shepherd of his people.

I think we should emphasize at least a few features in the life of the Good Shepherd which can clearly be seen in his self-portrait. He gives his life for his sheep. This is what makes us like the Good Shepherd so much. This is what urges us to return to him when we have gone astray. St John summarized this process as follows: God has proved his love for us by laying down his life for us. He did so in order that we might love our brethren and be ready to lay down our lives for them.

If we would like to go into more detail and consider what it means to say: He sacrificed his life, I think we should stress two points:

1 For our sakes he made the sacrifice of remaining lonely throughout his life.

2 This did not satisfy him. At the end of his life he also sacrificed himself, his physical life, to the last drop of his blood.

"A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

1 The sacrifice of loneliness. Perhaps we have far too little understanding for our Savior and his great, divine mission. We should try to picture him in our minds. He, the great God - "Et verbum caro factum est." He took to himself our human nature, and accepted the tremendous burden of trying to explain God, the Eternal Father, to his people, and teach them the eternal truths. How little understanding he found for all this throughout his life. He was lonely and misunderstood as he went about proclaiming his message. To a great extent his own person was not understood. Even his own Mother did not understand him immediately.

Our Savior was misunderstood. We need only think of the twelve-year-old Child in the Temple. His Mother did not understand what he wanted and said

so. He had almost to throw his words roughly into her face: "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house" (Luke 2:49). My whole being is directed towards the Father. I have to do what the Father wills of me.

He was not even understood by his relations. One would think that blood relations would easily understand one another. But there was no thought of this. As soon as our Savior began to reveal himself to the people as the Redeemer, they shook their heads and could not understand him.

And his countrymen, what did they say? When our Savior appeared in order to carry out his mission, they said: "Is he not the carpenter's son?" Our Savior was lonely. They did not understand his mission, and his relations shook their heads when he began to preach. Worse happened when he went out to preach in public. One day they followed him with his Mother because they thought he had gone mad.

Utter loneliness! What a severe sacrifice it must have been for our Savior. The Good Shepherd gives his life for his sheep. What an isolation! If we think of his apostles, how slow they were to understand and how inflexible! We may interpret the words of our Savior to Philip symbolically. The latter had heard our Lord speaking most enthusiastically about the Father, so they said: "Lord, show us the Father!" Then our Savior turned to him: "I have been so long with you ..." "Whoever sees me sees the Father." The very way in which the apostles faced our Lord shows that they had not understood his person or his mission.

And the people? On one occasion our Savior reproached them saying: You allowed yourselves to be fed with my bread, but you have not understood my mission. And so our Savior entered death without having been understood. We can hear him saying clearly from the cross: They do not know what they are doing. The poor people have not understood me. Yet this sacrifice of loneliness and isolation was crowned in death.

2 Yes, the Good Shepherd gives his life for his sheep. Should we want to meditate on this point for a while, we would have to write above the suffering and death of the Lord the words: No one forces me to do this; I do not need to give my life. Freely, for love of my people and my sheep, I have allowed myself to be nailed to the cross.

Let us for a moment consider what it would have been like if our Savior had said: Yes, I want to redeem the world, but only by taking on human nature. That is sacrifice enough. That would probably have been enough - to adopt our human nature. That would have been enough. Imagine a scale on the one side of which are collected all the sins of the world, perhaps multiplied a million times, and on the other side: "Et verbum caro factum est." This would have been sufficient to erase all the guilt of mankind. We think of the circumcision of our Lord. That tiny Child shed his blood. One tiny drop of blood shed by the God-Man would have sufficed, but it was not enough for him. What did he want? He wanted to prove in a prodigal fashion that he loves us. Our Savior loved us, and so he not only sacrificed his life for us, he not

only shed a drop of his blood for us, no, he offered up a stream of blood to the heavenly Father. Why ? This is the great law in God's kingdom - he wanted to be loved, and because he wanted to be loved he proved his love for mankind on a grand scale.

If you want to be loved, you must give yourself prodigally. If you want to draw the love of another to yourself, you must throw the whole of yourself into the balance. Truly, if you want to be loved, you must sacrifice yourself for the ones you love. That is the reason why the Son of God proved his love by shedding the last drop of his blood for us. It is said that every great person, every saint, began to strive for holiness from the moment that he or she first felt specially loved by God. This is the great law in God's kingdom. If I believe, know and feel that I am loved by God, my love is awakened in response. The eagle's flight of the God-Man! The eagle's flight of love awakens an eagle's flight of answering love.

What is the reason, then, that in our flight we can hardly lift ourselves from the ground? Why is it that we have so little enthusiasm for God and the divine? We do not understand the God-Man's eagle flight of love. That is why we continue in our old rut and live as though the God-Man had never lived or died for us.

We are told that Alexander the Great won battle after battle in Asia. On one occasion he and his soldiers were exposed to the blazing sun. The army became terribly thirsty. Nowhere could a drop of water be found. Suddenly they discovered a ditch. They immediately collected the water in a helmet and took it to Alexander. The Emperor was just about to drink the dirty water when he looked at his thirsty soldiers about him. What did he do? He poured out the water and did not drink it. He wanted to share their fate. And the result? The soldiers enthusiastically swore to remain loyal to him and to follow him through thick and thin.

You know what I want to say with this. When we see the picture of the Savior, our Lord on the cross shedding the last drop of his blood, what should it mean to each of us personally? The eagle's flight of love should awaken the eagle's flight of answering love. When we look into the lives of great Catholics of both sexes, how was it possible for them to give their all? Because they always re-kindled the firebrand of love in their hearts by looking at him who died for love of us. They understood the words of St John: God proved his love for us by giving his life for us. They also drew the conclusion: it is, therefore, fitting that we should also shed our blood for our brethren. That is to say, it is not enough to pretend and to play at loving one another. No, we must prove it by our deeds. We want to make sacrifices for one another. We want to bear the misunderstandings of life, we want to embrace the cross and suffering.

II This is the picture of the Good Shepherd. And if we want to meditate on the second thought, we must look from the ideal to its image and likeness. If all without exception want to etch the picture of our Saviour into ourselves, we

parents, as fathers and mothers, should do so in particular. Or, if we belong to a community, this applies particularly to those who have a leading position in such a community. What should we do?

- a Share in the teaching office,
the priestly office, and
the pastoral office of our Savior.

Allow me to turn for a moment to the parents. I ask: How have we, particularly in a strange country, exercised this office? Are we still aware that we have the serious duty to share in this triple office of the Good Shepherd? Instead of examining it in theory, let us answer this question by an example.

It was in the year 1863 that a certain French colonel died. His biography relates that he left a number of children who were Christians through and through. He regarded them as the crown of his life.

My children are the most glorious return of my activity as father and mother.

How did he look upon his task as a father? He set two principles before himself.

The first principle was: If I want to educate my children correctly, there is nothing else to be done but to strive personally for true sanctity.

His second principle: I must imitate the life of the Savior and treat my children with mild strictness. Yet this on its own is insufficient. From their childhood I must not only tell them about the highest ideals of Christianity, but also exemplify them.

These were the demands he made on himself and took up, so to say, into his last will and testament for his children.

His first advice to them was: If you go anywhere and fulfill a task, everyone should know within forty- eight hours what you are and think. Do not hide your Catholic attitude and behavior. This is what I, as your father, have always done, and it has not harmed me. On the contrary, I profited by it. We need not feel ashamed at being Catholic to the marrow of our bones. We must be what we are as fully as possible.

His second principle was: Whenever I felt depressed and did not know which way to turn, I hurried to Confession and to Communion.

This is the attitude of genuinely Catholic fathers. What do they share in? In our Savior's teaching office. They teach not only by speaking but by their lives. This is what it means to share in Christ's teaching office.

We also want to share in the Lord's pastoral office.

The same applies. The colonel we have just mentioned said: When I am a father I shall never lay aside my office, because my responsibility remains. I shall

always be the guard of my children and shall only stop doing so outwardly when God takes this office from me. (The task of praying and sacrificing for my children will never end.) He managed to save his children from too readily falling prey to the dangers of the time. He pointed them out to his children and thus protected them.

Hence, if I want to imitate the ideal of the Good Shepherd, what must I do? I must also share in his priestly office. This gives me the task of seeing to my children's religious education; I must take care that they are taught their religion. This applies to the father and not merely to the mother.

b Secondly, we also share in our Savior's sacrificial death. Once again let me quote one or the other example. We are told that the father of Anna Katharine Emmerich was in the habit of turning towards the church when he was working in his fields. He used to tell his young daughter: I want to be seen by our Lord in the tabernacle. And if he could not go to church during the week, he was in the habit of taking part spiritually in the three main parts of Holy Mass as soon as the church bells rang.

How many people do we know who are genuine Catholic fathers, who are real priests to their family, and who take in hand the office of praying and leading the prayers?

Our most perfect participation as fathers and mothers consists in allowing ourselves to be drawn into the Holy Sacrifice and into the life and death of our Savior. We then offer up everything for our children. As the priest in the family we want to live and die for our children.

Go and do what you have heard!

In the name of the Father ...
Amen.

DISPOSITION

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