

In today’s first reading, the apostle Peter speaking to the Jewish religious leaders following the Pentecost event three times mentions the “name” of Jesus, asserting the last time that “there is no other *name* under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved” (AA 4:12).

While we think of, and use, a “name” as a way of identifying a person or thing, in the culture of the Bible names were understood and experienced as something more than just a moniker. In the Bible, a person’s name was equal to, of the same essence of, an encounter with (even if physically absent) the person themselves. Perhaps the closest we can get to this understanding is the contemporary experience of the crime of “identity theft.” Having been a victim a few years back, I do not recommend the experience! Suddenly my life, my ability to engage with others had been taken. I had to take numbers of steps to regain my identity and then have those steps monitored for a period of time to ascertain that whoever had stolen my personal information was not using it. Once I had retrieved my “name” I was able once again to resume normal day-to-day life, especially in the area of finances. I had my “identity” back!

In today’s familiar Gospel passage, Jesus self-identifies naming himself the “Good Shepherd”. Jesus then elaborates on what being the “Good Shepherd” consists. The good shepherd “lays down his life for the sheep”; is one who is in intimate relationship with the sheep “ I know mine and mine know me”, a relationship flowing from Jesus’ own knowing and being known by the Father, “just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.” As the good shepherd, Jesus has a universal vision and care, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold, these I also must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd. Finally, as shepherd, Jesus will “lay down” his life for the sheep.

In naming himself the “Good Shepherd” Jesus invites those who hear his voice into relationship with him. To know and proclaim the “name” of Jesus means to enter into his sheepfold, to choose relationship with him. Relationship with Jesus is more than just knowing his name in the sense that we generally understand and use a name. Or to put it in

a more contemporary image; it is more than just “friending” Jesus on Facebook. While some of these “friends” may indeed be persons with which we have a personal (or even an intimate) relationship, one can “friend” hundreds or thousands of other people who may, or may not, actually be real people and carry on a “virtual” relationship that goes no deeper than a click on an electronic device and demands nothing from us or from the other.

The Danish philosopher and Lutheran pastor, Soren Kierkegaard once stated that Jesus calls not a group of admirers or fans, but followers. To choose to “friend” Jesus, to “name” him, means that we are to become good shepherds ourselves. We are to enter into the essence, the very identity of Jesus. We, too, are to “lay down” our lives for the sake of others in imitation of Jesus’ own self-sacrificial love poured out on the cross. While our laying down of our life doesn’t necessarily mean we will be physically nailed to a cross (though the Church has had, and continues to have, its martyrs), laying down our life does mean a commitment to live our lives for the sake of others. We lay down our lives in imitation of Jesus the Good Shepherd in such daily deeds as visiting the sick, forgiving those who wrong us, speaking up and acting for justice for those wronged, engaging in works of justice such as the many service opportunities offered by our parish Social Justice Committee.

We come to intimacy with another person whose name we know by opening ourselves to deepened relationship with them through various forms of communion—listening to them, engaging in conversation, spending quality time with them, sharing table fellowship with them. So, too, Jesus the Good Shepherd. In listening to, reading, reflecting, praying with the Scriptures; in a daily commitment to prayer, and most especially weekly active presence and participation in Holy Mass, the person and name of Jesus and our name and identity become one.

Like the apostle Peter, knowing and living the name of Jesus the Good Shepherd, our lives can proclaim that “there is no other name by which the world” is saved.