

EASTER SUNDAY IV “A”

MAY 3, 2020

In Chapter 66 of his Rule for monasteries, Saint Benedict addresses the responsibilities of the monk chosen to be the porter—the doorman of the monastery. St. Benedict decrees: *At the door of the monastery, place a sensible old man who knows how to take a message and deliver a reply, and whose age keeps him from roaming about. This porter will need a room near the entrance so that visitors will always find him there to answer them.*

In the days of Benedict the porter or gatekeeper was not only a “greeter” but also a security agent. The safety and welfare of a city or, in Benedict’s case, a monastery depended on him, thus St. Benedict’s requirement that this individual be a tried and tested member of the community who would “stay put” in his place and at devote full attention to his task and not be someone who would “roam” around. A modern day example of Benedict’s porter would be the TSA agents whom we encounter at our airports.

Today, on this traditional “Good Shepherd Sunday”, Jesus identifies himself as both the “gatekeeper” and the “gate.” In Jesus’ day and up to recent times (on my trip to Israel in the fall of 2018 I saw Bedouin shepherds using smart phones and transporting sheep by truck, so much for those romantic images of shepherds and sheep!) the shepherd and sheep lived together. It was the shepherd’s job as the familiar images from today’s Responsorial Psalm, Psalm 23, states to provide water, food (green pastures) and administer healing ointment to a sheep if it cut itself on a thorn bush or was injured in a confrontation with predator. It was also the shepherd’s job to be the night “watchman”; to guard the flock from animal or human predators. At night the sheep would be herded into small stone-walled corrals scattered throughout the countryside whose opening allowed only one sheep at a time to enter. Once the sheep were corralled, and bedded down for the night, the shepherd would lay down across the opening, literally becoming the gate. Any sheep, let alone predator, would need to go in or out through him. Every shepherd carried with him two essential tools. The shepherd’s staff with its familiar hook at one end was used to reign in any sheep who strayed or may have fallen into a ravine, the other end of the staff was pointed and sharp so the shepherd could gently goad any strays to keep up with the rest of the flock. In addition, the shepherd carried a “rod”, a club which could be used against a predator manually or thrown at it in defense of the flock. As a security guard, the good shepherd was the

principal line of defense as well as trustworthy guide for the flock. The shepherd stood ready to lay down his own life if necessary to safeguard the sheep given to his care. So close was the bond between the shepherd and the sheep that not only did the shepherd give each a name and know its particular characteristics, but the sheep “bonded” with the shepherd and would only listen to and follow his voice.

Through his incarnation, taking on our human life, Jesus bonded himself to us. In the sacrament of Baptism Jesus calls each of us by name. He leads us to the water of rebirth. In the sacrament of Confirmation Jesus anoints our head with oil as a sign of the permanency of our union with him. In the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist Jesus feeds us with his very own body and blood, which he laid down in the face of the assault of the Devil through sin and death, the gate that had kept the way to God blocked as the result of Original Sin. For us Jesus the Good Shepherd is the “Way, Truth and Life”; our entrance into, and abiding in, the life of God.

In these days of isolation, of feelings of anxiety and even abandonment, I encourage all of us to make time each day, to “connect” with God through prayer, reading and reflecting on Holy Scripture, participating in our live stream Masses and entering a spiritual communion with Jesus until such time that we can gather publicly again. In these ways we “hear and follow” Jesus our Shepherd who is close to us, who does not abandoned us, who continues to lead us so that we “might have life and have it more abundantly” (Jn.10:10).

3 May, 2020
Father Jim Devoa