

Easter 4

The Good Shepherd

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This week I learned where the word “quarantine” comes from. It comes from the Italian “quaranta giorni” –forty days. In the middle ages it seems that 40 days was the maximum you could expect people to stay indoors during a plague before they would go stir crazy and start slipping outdoors. Well, this weekend we are rounding 40 days. And people are getting pretty restless.

Today’s Gospel gives us an appropriate metaphor. Sheep penned in, eager to be led out by their shepherd. But there are also thieves who look only to steal the sheep. We have not been spared thieves either. People scalping masks and sanitizer, even toilet paper. Remember those prices on Amazon before they realized all the bad publicity they were getting and shut the sellers down? I enjoyed a British news clip about someone who had bought out a store of all its toilet paper, only to try to return it once the shelves had been replenished, and he realized that hoarding it was not going to enable him to sell it at a markup. The store owner refused to take back the cases upon cases of toilet paper he had bought. It just gave me a warm feeling inside.

How discern between shepherd and thief? How tell whether your own desires are inspirations or temptations? Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits wrote up some rules for discriminating between the two. What he called the “discernment of spirits.”

He begins by distinguishing between consolation and desolation. Consolation he says is like a drop of water falling on a sponge. It just soaks right in. Desolation on the other hand is like a drop of water falling on a rock. It bounces off, eventually wearing down even the hardest rock.

If we are heading towards God, then consolation is a sign of the good spirit, desolation a sign of an evil spirit, that would wear us down. If we have turned away from God, then it’s the opposite, consolation panders to our self-centeredness, whereas desolation accompanies any effort at reform. So to know how to evaluate our feelings we have to know which way we are headed. And in different aspects of our lives we can be headed in different directions. For the evil spirit is wily, Ignatius warns. It strikes our blind spots, where our defenses are weak. Where we are apt to fool ourselves.

Furthermore Ignatius warns that the evil spirit can come disguised as an angel of light. So Ignatius emphasizes that we need to remain self-critical. Not take what appears to be inspirations at face value, nor assume something is a temptation without first thinking it through. To weigh our desires we have to come to know ourselves. And knowing ourselves, that is not rocket science, its harder, for to know ourselves we have to face ourselves, and we are mysterious, especially to ourselves.

Afterall God is mysterious, and we are made in God’s image. One way I have found to discern my desires when I am genuinely confused over whether to follow a desire or resist it, is to ask myself how I would advise someone else if they came to me with the same question. It can give me some distance on myself, and some compassion, for many of us are far harder on ourselves

that we are on others. For example I used to beat myself up whenever I would make a mistake. But one day I stopped myself and asked if I would ever judge anyone else as harshly as I was judging myself at that moment. I decided then and there that I needed to cut it out. It took time, but eventually I broke the bad habit.

From then on, I have liked to occasionally remind people in a homily that to treat others as you treat yourself is not good news for other people if you treat yourself badly. We need to stand up for ourselves sometimes even to ourselves.

Today's sheep know the sound of their shepherd's voice calling them. They do not recognize the sound of the thief. Deep down, we too know the sound of our shepherds voice, we can recognize his whistle from that of all those false would-be shepherds. If we can but quiet down from time to time, take some time off and apart and unencumber ourselves of the demands on us for a moment, we can come to recognize our shepherd's whistle.

He *will* lead us out of our pen. In his own time. We are all getting restless. And its tempting to cast blame. But if we can but keep the faith, wait and listen, Christ will lead us out.

There is a fresco in Florence commemorating the black plague that ravaged the city. It's an image of townspeople, rich and poor, prominent and beggars all huddled under Mary's outstretched cloak, covering them all. It's a consoling image. Bishops around the world are coming to rededicate their dioceses to Mary at this time of anxiety, suffering and death. For she is our go-to common mother in times of sorrow, for we know that she knows what it is like to suffer, and to watch helplessly as loved ones suffer and die. The second half of the Hail Mary was added during the Black plague: "Holy Mary, Mother of God. Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death."

Crucifixes in the late middle ages also depicted a sadder, bloodier, more naked and limp Jesus. In times of anxiety and sorrow, in times of suffering and death, we do not need a hero, we look to someone who knows what we are going through, to be with us, and hold us close.

We will not be able to crown Mary this month, or pray our living rosary. But we can still look to her, and to her loving gaze looking at us, sorrowful and suffering with us, as we wait penned up, restless and apart.