

Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd

April 29, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

The Collect for the Fourth Sunday of Easter reads: *O God, whose Son Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice, we may know him who calls us each by name and follow where he leads.....*

Throughout my five years of boarding school during World War II, many, many years ago, one of the Masters we had was rather stern, even intimidating. He was a large man, at least to a small boy, and if circumstances warranted, his voice could match his girth. His name was Xavier Prum and he was a native of the Duchy of Luxembourg. He taught mathematics and physics. All in all he was a formidable person, but he was a born teacher. His sound scholarship and contagious enthusiasm were supplemented by qualities of fairness and humor. He could be the most generous of men, particularly where he saw genuine need or genuine potential in a boy. He was one of those rare

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teachers who commanded both the respect and affection of their students.

There is one characteristic of his dealings with us which most of us who knew him will always remember. Clowning in his classroom was unheard of. He quickly sensed bluff or insincerity. Half right, or near right, didn't cut it. If we were trying to fudge an answer, trying to hide the fact that we didn't really know it, he would suddenly stop our stammering, look one straight in the eye, up close and personal, speaking very slowly and ominously, he would ask, *Yes or no, do you know the answer?* At this point we knew that no further postponement of confessing one's ignorance was possible. You either said you didn't know, or took a wild guess and accepted the consequences.

I share this memory with you because our Liturgy is very much like that Schoolmaster in exercising a

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certain discipline over us, a discipline we very much need. The Liturgy insists that you and I express the great truths of the faith without equivocation. Left to our own devices, we frequently indulge in a great deal of equivocation both in public and in private. *Who, in fact was Jesus?* What do we mean when we say the words *Son of God?* Wasn't it a common title for the great and famous in that culture and time? *Did Jesus really rise from the dead?* Do we believe that *literally?* What does *literally* mean, anyway? On and on we go, indulging our restless doubtings and wonderings. Too much learning can make us *tentative* believers.

Liturgy has the capacity to take us in hand like a firm, but essentially, loving teacher. Like a schoolmaster, at least like those of the old school, who taught us all day, who lived with us and so often knew us better than our parents did, the Liturgy knows well the mental games we like to play. From time to time,

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therefore, it takes us in hand and applies its firm corrections. It recognizes the real truth about *us* and about our *faith*. The truth is that we do not have minds great enough, nor hearts large enough, nor vision deep enough to say the truth in plain, simple words of power and conviction. Knowing this, the Liturgy offers us its disciplinary grace by forcing us to do what we seldom do ourselves.

The opening words of the Collect for this day are such a moment. We say, *O God, whose Son Jesus....* For the moment we don't have to go any farther. In one breath we have dealt with all that may be tentative in our minds about Jesus. In fact, this statement does more than link our Lord with God. By making the statement of this great Christian mystery, merely the introduction to the further statement that Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the prayer suggests that the divinity of our Lord is so obviously true that it can be taken entirely for granted. No more need be said. The faith

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in Jesus this prayer expresses is a quality of faith we possessed as a child, wish we possessed now, and, in rare moments of spiritual vision, actually *do* possess.

When in those moments we *do* achieve this level of faith in our Lord, we *allow* him to be our Good Shepherd. This simplicity and sureness of faith in him, as God in human flesh, is what he waits for his Church to recapture and rejoice in again. It then becomes possible for him to lead us where he wishes us to go, and to give us the grace to follow him into places we do not wish to go, or have the will to go.

This prayer reminds us of something else. It tells us that when we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, what we hear is the most powerful of all sounds in our ears, *our own name*. All our lives we hear our own name as we hear nothing else. We hear it called in every conceivable tone and setting, and for reasons and purposes too numerous to mention. Our name has

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been spoken by voices we will never forget and by voices we wish we could forget and cannot. Our name has been called lovingly, sternly, harshly, gently, angrily, seductively. We have heard it whispered passionately and shouted in exasperation.

To know that our name is on the lips of our Lord is to possess the richest intimacy with him. To know that he speaks to us gives us our ultimate sense of who we *truly* are, and we can respond to his invitation to live fully and courageously. As this prayer calls us to do, we become capable of following where the Good Shepherd leads and isn't that really quite a wonderful gift to receive? I believe that it is.

AMEN.