

The 4th Sunday of Easter is always *Baaaaaa* Sunday, Good Shepherd Sunday. And it's easy to see how it got that nickname, with 3 scripture readings talking about sheep and shepherds. But the nickname is a little off. Jesus starts with a shepherd analogy in the Gospel, but He doesn't say "I am the Good Shepherd;" He says "I am the gate."

He's referring to a function of shepherds in his day. Sheep were kept together in a sheepfold, a holding pen surrounded by bushes or rocks just high enough so the sheep wouldn't be able to get over them. At the entry, the shepherd lied down to block the exit of the sheep, to protect them from thieves and wolves.

He literally laid down his life for his sheep. Our expression "over my dead body" is true here. And when the shepherd stands up, he's opened the gate to lead the sheep out to green pastures. Shepherds provide both protection and nourishment.

So when Jesus says "I am the gate," he's saying he protects us by laying down his life for us, and He'll lead us to abundant life. It's over His dead body that we are saved. His Easter is our gate.

Sheep love the sound of their shepherd's voice, because he shields them from wolves and thieves; he leads them to green pastures; when they fall and can't get up because of all that wool, he helps them back up on their feet. They know he has their best interests in mind. It's the same with our good shepherd Jesus.

Thieves and wolves are after our souls, voices trying to call us away from our Good Shepherd, from His Gospel values. They might be some of our friends – today would be a good occasion to reassess our friendships. Do they draw us closer to Christ or further away from Him? If the latter, break that relationship!

Voices in the media can also call us away from Gospel values – politicians, stars in the entertainment and sports worlds, and advertising, can draw us away by influencing or encouraging us to become selfish, self-centered. They compete against the voice of Jesus. They promise much, but they don't deliver abundant life, everlasting life. Reassess them, too. If they don't feed us, they want to feed on us.

Jesus is the Gate who closes to protect us and the Gate who opens up to lead us to nourishment and abundant life. These days we're hearing a lot about opening up: open up the country, open up for business, open up the stores.

How about open up to Christ? Open up to Christ who knows each one of us by name, like the shepherds in Jesus's day did. Open up our ears in faith, open up our hearts in trust, open up our minds in love. Because Jesus is the Gate to abundant Life.

When He closes the gate, it's not deprivation; it's protection. It's the values of a coach, a teacher, a doctor, a parent, looking out for what's in our best interest. When He opens up the gate for us to follow him, around rocks and through dark valleys, there will be crosses – insults, sins, suffering and rejection wounds along the way, but He's leading us to abundant life, everlasting life in His kingdom, where there's no more evil, no more threats or dangers, good health, a banquet waiting, and the feeling of truly being at home.

Jesus wants to save us, make us whole, and give eternal life to those who hear the voice of God in Him, and who keep faith in Him when the cross of suffering enters our lives. ... We could get angry instead and walk away from God, but the suffering doesn't stop. Trust in the Good Shepherd; ultimately we will be safe, and hear God lovingly calling us by name.

In prayer, let's tell Jesus where we need refreshment. And let's listen to the voice of Jesus the Good Shepherd in the scriptures, in the Mass, in our prayerful reflection. Then, by our words and example, we can attract others to enter the Gate of Christ, and help them discover the more abundant life that Jesus wants to give all of us. Open up!

Fr. John Ozella, Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 3, 2020