

ZE07042729 - 2007-04-27

Permalink: <http://www.zenit.org/article-19486?l=english>

Father Cantalamessa on the Good Shepherd

Pontifical Household Preacher Comments on Sunday's Readings

ROME, APRIL 27, 2007 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Here is a translation of a commentary by the Pontifical Household preacher, Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, on the readings from this Sunday's liturgy.

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I am the Good Shepherd

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Acts 13:14, 43-52; Revelations 7:9, 14b-17; John 10:27-30

In all three liturgical cycles the Fourth Sunday of Easter presents a passage from John's Gospel about the good shepherd. After having led us among the fishermen last Sunday, this Sunday the Gospel takes us among the shepherds. These are two categories of equal importance in the Gospels. From the one comes the designation "fishers of men," from the other "shepherd of souls." Both are applied to the apostles.

The larger part of Judea was a plateau with inhospitable and rocky soil, more adapted to livestock than to agriculture. Grass was scarce and the flock had to continually travel from one spot to another; there were no walls for protection and because of this the shepherd always had to be with the flock. A traveler of the last century has left us a portrait of the shepherd of Palestine: "When you see him in a high pasture, sleepless, a gaze that searches in the distance, weather-beaten, leaning on his staff, ever attentive to the movements of the flock, you understand why the shepherd acquired such importance in the history of Israel that they gave this title to their kings and Christ assumed it as an emblem of self-sacrifice."

In the Old Testament, God himself is represented as the shepherd of his people. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" (Psalm (23:1). "He is our God and we are his people whom he shepherds" (Psalm 95:7). The future Messiah is also described with the image of the shepherd: "Like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, carrying them in his bosom, and leading the ewes with care" (Isaiah 40:11). This ideal image of the shepherd finds its complete realization in Christ. He is the good shepherd who goes in search of the lost sheep; he feels compassion for the people because he sees them "as sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36); he calls his disciples "the little flock" (Luke 12:32). Peter calls Jesus "the shepherd of our souls" (1 Peter 2:25) and the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of him as "the great shepherd of the sheep" (Hebrews 13:20).

This Sunday's Gospel passage highlights some of the characteristics of Jesus the good shepherd. The first has to do with the reciprocal knowledge that the sheep and shepherd have: "My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me." In certain countries of Europe sheep are raised principally for their meat; in Israel they were raised above all for wool and milk. For this reason they remained for many years in the company of the shepherd who knew the character of each one and gave them affectionate names.

What Jesus wants to say with these images is clear. He knows his disciples (and, as God, all men), he knows

them "by name," which for the Bible means their innermost essence. He loves them with a personal love that treats each as if they were the only one who existed for him. Christ only knows how to count to one, and that one is each of us.

The Gospel passage tells us something else about the good shepherd. He gives his life to his sheep and for his sheep, and no one can take them out of his hand. Wild animals -- wolves and hyenas -- and bandits were a nightmare for the shepherds of Israel. In such isolated places they were a constant threat. This was the moment in which is revealed the difference between the true shepherd -- the one who shepherds the family's flock, who does this for his life's work -- and the hired hand, who works only for the pay he receives, who does not love, and indeed often hates, the sheep.

Confronted with danger, the mercenary flees and leaves the sheep at the mercy of the wolf or bandits; the true shepherd courageously faces the danger to save the flock. This explains why the liturgy proposes the passage about the good shepherd to us during the time of Easter -- the moment in which Christ showed that he is the good shepherd who gives his life for his sheep.

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