

Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 21, 2013
Homily for the Anglican Usage Mass
of the
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
John 10:27-30

The past week has been one of anxiety, particularly for the people of Boston, but by extension for all of us here in the United States. With the terrorist attacks that occurred at the Boston Marathon on Monday, we once again see the contrast between the methods of the Good Shepherd and those of the wolf. And at the same time, we give thanks that the example of the Good Shepherd has not been lost on a good number of our countrymen.

Jesus teaches us that the wolf comes to snatch, kill, and destroy; and this is precisely the method of the man who placed a bomb at the feet of an eight-year-old boy two-and-a-half minutes before detonating it, the method of those who shot a police officer in cold blood, of those who indiscriminately threw explosives from their vehicle and strapped bombs to their bodies. None of what these Chechen men did should surprise us, for the wolf always chooses death, both for himself and others. What we must ask is why, and here Jesus gives us an answer as well.

It is actually in Jesus' assurances to us that we learn what the wolf wants. Jesus says, "No one shall snatch them out of my hand," and then we learn that the wolf desires our souls, desires to separate us from the love of Him who brought us into existence and offered Himself for our redemption after we had gone astray. Jesus teaches that the wolf has no power to do this since, even if he destroys our bodies, Jesus again assures us, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish."

The wolf's power then comes in the temptation he presents to adopt his methods. We have before us the example of the Good Shepherd, Who lays down His life for the sheep, and we know that this love is the one we are called to emulate. But along comes the wolf, sowing death and destruction, and we feel the impulse to revenge. We imagine that if we become as proficient as the wolf in sowing death, we can eliminate death. We can trade loving service for total mastery and banish from this world all who threaten us and our fellow innocents.

The absurdity of this proposal should be obvious, but when we're hurting, when the wolf has just killed and injured dozens of the sheep for no apparent reason, at least no rational reason, we don't think as clearly. We don't see that the wolf has set a trap, that he has lured us into his domain as soon as we resolve to do as he has done. As soon as we believe that violence is a more effective form of persuasion than is service, then the wolf has accomplished his purpose.

Our week was not filled only with terror, however. We also received this week the example of the volunteer firemen of the town of West, Texas. When the local fertilizer plant caught on fire, they immediately recognized the potential for a massive explosion; and they set about evacuating the area adjacent to the plant. At a neighboring nursing home they couldn't get the people out, so they moved them all to the back of the building. Then they continued to fight the fire. Their efforts benefitted their town. Though a four-square-block area was obliterated when the plant did finally explode, the loss of life among the civilian population was minimal. Of the fourteen people killed in West, eleven of them were first responders, three of whom were still in training. Their service and sacrifice is the week's encouraging contrast to the terrorism in Boston. In the fulfillment of their duty, we see the embodiment of Jesus' words, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Nor can

we forget the first responders in Boston who willingly placed themselves between the people of their city and the homicidal maniacs so intent to kill that one brother literally ran over the other in order to get away.

How do we foster in ourselves that fortitude that enabled those men and women to stare death in the face and not blink? The answer really is in our discipleship, which means modeling our lives after that of the Good Shepherd. Our gratitude for the love of the Good Shepherd should lead us to emulate that love, but in order for us to do what He did, we must study both His words and His actions. Discipleship then means becoming intimately acquainted with the life of Him who gave us life.

Therefore, the first means by which we garner the courage of our Lord is to begin a conversation with Him. The Good Shepherd has won our trust by His sacrifice on our behalf, and by it we have peace, the realization that come hell or high water, we really don't have anything to worry about: our souls are safe. It is in our prayer life that we will become ever more and more convinced of the Good Shepherd's love for us. In prayer He will reveal to us whom He wants us to shepherd; but if we take time to listen, we will also be told who has shepherded us. Discipleship begins with prayer, for we cannot listen to our Master if we don't recognize His voice.

Prayer, however, is insufficient alone. Discipleship must also include study, simply because the evil one often disguises himself as an angel of light. That is, we must know that what the Lord asks us to do is consistent with what He has asked all His disciples to do. We must know what is Catholic and what is not, what is Scriptural and what is not, what is the tradition of the Church and what is not. Thus, to be faithful disciples, we must have a working knowledge of the Bible and the Catechism of the Catholic Church—the Bible so we know the Word of God, and the Catechism so we know how to interpret what God has said. If we neglect study, the devil will be able to infiltrate our prayer life and tell us things that aren't true; and for our laziness, we won't know the difference.

Which brings us to our last element of faithful discipleship. The faithful Catholic knows what he does not know. But he also knows where to find the answers he lacks. If we are to make sense of our prayers and study, we must have recourse also to a holy and knowledgeable pastor who loves the Lord Jesus. Where we are weak, we need to be strengthened; and God has given us the Church to provide ready aides who will accompany us as we grow in the Faith. There are no Lone Ranger Catholics, at least none that is faithful. That is, the good Shepherd has taught us that we need shepherds; and because He is good, He has provided them. So use them. We are more faithful to the Truth when we ask for help than when we don't.

A healthy dependence such as this engenders love. We know that everyone is valuable because everyone is indispensable. And we see that the terrorists in Boston were able to kill because they didn't think they needed the victims who died. And the firemen of West, Texas, laid down their lives for their neighbors because they didn't want us to be without the gifts of even one of their fellow sheep. By the end of the week, I was encouraged. I know which model most people will choose to honor.