

**Fourth Sunday of Easter Cycle A
April 25, 1999**

By Father Charles Bowes

**Acts of the Apostles 2:14a, 36-41
1 Peter 2:20b-25
John 10:1-10**

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, risks everything that we may have life to the full.

“Over my dead body!” Have you ever heard that challenge? It bangs around in my brain as something I’ve surely heard a few times and maybe even said on occasion. These words push their way back into my consciousness when I see this Sunday’s scripture, John chapter 10 and the first letter of Peter chapter 2.

“By his wounds you have been healed,” says the first letter of Peter. That letter says in part, “He did no wrong; no deceit was found in his mouth. When he was insulted he returned no insult. He was made to suffer, he did not counter with threats. No, he delivered himself up to the one who judges justly. ...by his wounds you were healed.” In other words Jesus takes our sin, the brokenness of our world and the unloving choices we make - Jesus takes all of this into his own body on the cross. Only by his wounds and death are we healed and given life. It is over his dead body that we find life.

And then there is the image of the shepherd in John chapter 10, which illustrates this self-gift so total of Jesus. I once heard a description of Middle Eastern shepherding practices. The sheepfold, especially one

unattached to a larger settlement or dwelling, in that part of the world, is a circular wall of stones topped by barriers of briar. There is a small opening for the sheep to pass through. Once they are all in, instead of closing a hinged gate, the shepherd simply lies across the opening, so that nothing or no one can get through without going over his body first, without confronting or even killing him. This particular kind of shepherd literally made himself into a barrier gate, a role that requires not only care, but courage. If any marauders or predators are to get to the sheep they will only do so over the dead body of the shepherd.

When Jesus reveals that he is the gate of the sheepfold, he is not just suggesting that he is the unique way into safety or the only way out to pasture. He is saying that he will prevent our destruction by laying down his life. He has come to us that we may have life and have it abundantly. This is no mamby-pamby gentle Jesus - but a character of extraordinary strength. Shepherds in Palestine were tough and assertive, ready to defend against enemies. Even the handsome shepherd boy David, whom we picture in pastoral peacefulness playing his lyre, could drive off predators with a slingshot. Shepherds slept in the open and took turns staying awake at night, which meant they were often the first in the region to receive important news as it

was passed around the countryside by overland messengers. They moved about more freely than most and therefore sometimes became conduits of information but leaders of underground movements - risking everything not only for the sheep, but even at times for their people.

Jesus is this sort of shepherd - the Good Shepherd. Can we be lost or destroyed? Only over the Lord's dead body. But he has risen now, to die no more. Through the laying down of his life on the cross and his rising before us, we are lead into the sheepfold of eternal life - and we shall never perish. This holy food, this gathering are testimonies to this.

I like the remark by Dorothy L. Sayers in one of her radio scripts; she wrote: "Jesus Christ is the only thing that has ever really happened."

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