

14<sup>th</sup> Sun. Ord Time (A)  
St. Athanasius and St. Francis Parishes  
July 8 and 9, 2017

In my weekly bulletin item a few weeks ago I mentioned a hymn used at the Priest Ordinations that I really liked: “The Heart of a Shepherd” You have heard it being played as we gathered today, and just now following today's gospel text.

If you love me, feed my lambs; be my heart, my voice, my hands.

If you love me, feed my sheep.

And for my part, I give you the heart of a shepherd.

I plan to come back to those words a bit later.

When I came here three years ago, some of you felt you were at a difficult place, even a low place as a parish. Some did not have that same feeling and, as usually happens, some were unaware. There was even some division within the parish. But there was also a feeling of sadness .... not all for the same reasons, but I think that sadness was generally felt. Why are we at this place? How did we get to this place?

Now three years later, that feeling of sadness seems to have been lifted. In its place there is a sense of happiness, and even maybe a feeling of genuine joy. As the three years passed, God blessed the parish, ... and we can feel it, we can see it. How this happened and when this happened will be different for each of us ... but the parish is noticeably different. With Jesus, as we hear him say in today's Gospel, *“I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to little ones.”*

One of the things I learned first hand during my 10 years as Vicar is that parishes do have their ups and downs, their productive, growing years and their lean even declining years. I also learned that many times these cycles can be brought on by parishioners themselves. Sometimes, except in situations of 'outside tragedies' these productive or lean years happen so gradually that we fail to notice it until we are up to our necks in the situation. A parish can be like any other group or organization of people: there are those who are content when others step up to do things for them and in place of them, AND there are always those who are only too happy to take control and do this. Sooner or later, however, the entire group, organization or parish is suffering. Groups, parishes must be alert to the fact that those who are only too happy to do everything can really be controlling, and keeping others from sharing in the responsibility and burdens of the parish. It is a matter of keeping your eyes and your hearts open to the entire parish. And often in my personal experience, it is my heart that speaks to me first. My heart is moved and only then do my eyes see.

Today's Gospel text is one you have heard often at funerals. In such cases it is probably

heard quite differently than it is meant to be heard today. At a funeral we may hear only the last part .... "*Come to me all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.*" At a funeral we may hear this in terms of someone who died after a hard life, or years of suffering. Or, we may hear it in terms of the caretakers who have given much of their energy and time to comfort the one who has died. Today, however, we are asked to hear these words as both a reflection on and a new interpretation of its original source, OT Wisdom. And this wisdom is good especially to focus us against some of the struggles in parish life.

In many places throughout his Gospel account, Matthew is reminiscent of OT Wisdom theology.

1. In those Wisdom Scriptures, we hear how God's gracious will and the designs of the world are quite different. My will is not always God's will. Hopefully we still desire God's will even though the designs and will of the world may be easier and more attractive. Recall how often we pray: "Our Father, who art in heaven... hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, **THY WILL BE DONE.**"
2. Another aspect of today's Gospel that refers back to the Wisdom of the OT, is that God has reversed the expectations of the world. Now the hidden things of God are revealed to the lowly, the child-like, rather than to the wise and the powerful of the world. Those who feel quite self-sufficient in themselves often struggle to be open to the ways of God and beyond that to also depend on God.
3. A final such connection to OT Wisdom is that real wisdom, or knowledge, comes from reflection on experience. To really know something presumes that one has had experience with that aspect of life. Widows and widowers probably know more about death than one who has not lost a spouse in death. A divorced person can know more about the challenges of marriage than one who remains married, and indeed happily so. Thus it follows that we will only know the will of God and what it means to live according to God's will if we first know God himself. Be not afraid of knowing God deeply, and letting God know you.

But when we give time to these goals of knowing God deeply, opening ourselves to God deeply, and seeking to do God's will, we will often grow tired. Again "*Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. ....Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart;*"

Remember some words I shared with you on my first weekend with you. It was the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sun. of Lent, March 22, 23 of 2014:

Often we speak of Lent as a journey to new life through the cross. We speak of it as a time for conversion. As I said briefly at our coming together today, "I think I understand some of the things that have happened here the last while; I also know I don't understand everything that has happened. But probably in terms of whatever has happened ... and now me standing here today and not Fr. Scott,

...these days of Lent can be a time of conversion for us together. For that to happen, however, we must DECIDE for ourselves to be part of the journey, to share in the cross. We will need to see conversion as something we undergo personally.

I believe this has happened for many here. Your hearts will indicate that to you, and your eyes will see things in a new way. Now you come to a new transition. Maybe an analogy can help....

We have come to the shore with each other, and of course with Jesus. The vision of what lies ahead has been heard and shared. Together we have caught a glimpse of what lies ahead. Now you must get into the boat and let it take you to what you have seen. Now you must leave the familiar land you know and feel comfortable in. You can do this because you know what can be,.... indeed what is already happening around you here in the parish. And when you grow weary even tired, remember Jesus saying to you “

*“Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. ....Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart;”*

And for my part, my hope and intent has always been, and now my prayer is, that more often than not I have indeed given you 'the heart of a shepherd'. May it be so!