

4th Sun. of Easter (C)
St. Athanasius and St. Francis Parishes
April 16, 17, 2016

It took a while before anything came together for this week's homily. It was not until a couple phrases familiar to all of us came to my mind: "AMBER ALERT" and "THE TRICKEL DOWN EFFECT". We will get to those in a minute.

But first recall our gatherings/holy Assemblies of last weekend when we celebrated First Holy Communion with our children and their families. Weekends like those are wonderful 'feel good' weekends. The children are all dressed up and special attempts to relate to the children are made. How can you not like and feel good about those things?

At first blush today's Scriptures seem to fall into the same kind of 'feel good' category. It is Good Shepherd Sunday, and it would be easy to let sentimentality overshadow the really forceful challenge of all 3 of our Scriptures. The image of a man standing in the midst of a flock of sheep and lambs, holding his staff, gazing contentedly around is a common theme in sacred art. It is comforting, yet very passive. This is probably why this image as well as Psalm 23 (The Lord is my Shepherd) is so frequently heard at the time of a death. At such a time we are in need of comfort. But Good Shepherd Sunday on the 4th weekend of Easter is not such a time. In fact, if we let it remain in the category of 'comforting' and 'feel good' we miss the real point of the Scriptures, and we ignore the mind of the Church for this Sunday.

Look at the gospel text again .. the statements that Jesus makes. This very brief gospel is anything but passive.

"MY sheep hear."

"I KNOW them."

"THEY FOLLOW me."

"I GIVE them ETERNAL LIFE, AND THEY SHALL NEVER perish."

"NO ONE CAN take..."

"MY FAHTER WHO HAS GIVEN THEM TO ME IS GREATER THAN ALL.."

This is not an image of the idyllic country life. In fact, these words are Jesus' answer to the religious leaders of the day who said to Him, "If you are the Messiah ... speak to us plainly." And so Jesus did. He says in effect, **"I am not going to let you go! In my relationship with the Father, you belong to me, to us! Therefore YOU be possessive with those whom I have given you. YOU stay faithful, YOU forgive, YOU go after the one who has wandered off."**

I think the common phrases AMBER ALERT and TRICKLE DOWN EFFECT can help us see and even feel this urgency. When some one is lost, maybe even kidnapped, taken away, there is an AMBER ALERT. Sometimes even as many as 100 people go looking for the person. Remember Lyric Cook-Morriseey and her cousin Elizabeth Collins. Or

remember the Burmese young man from Waterloo Moe Sed. In both cases, large numbers of people responded to the AMBER ALERT.

Faith and our life in God must fit into an equal level of concern for us. Yet often it doesn't! We say everyone is free to make up their own mind. But when someone is in danger of losing their very life it is not a matter of whatever they choose. Maybe as Jesus said from the cross and St. Stephen said when he was being stoned to death, "they don't know what they are doing". That is possible! Nonetheless, and especially, those of us who do know must shepherd them. Remember from last weekend, "*Feed by lambs Tend my sheep!*" This is not sentimental, warm-fuzzy stuff. This is a matter of life and death; and eternal life and eternal death at that!

Each Sunday the last words we hear at Mass are "we are sent to love and serve the Lord" to which we all respond "Thanks be to God." But then what? There is an AMBER ALERT to reach out to those wandering, even those lost. This is an AMBER ALERT on behalf of those children who made First Communion last week but who are not here this week.

Today's second Scripture praises the large crowd assembled around the throne. Do you ever think of yourself as part of this large crowd ... what else are you here but 'assembled around God's throne?' But how did that crowd get there? They are the ones who have survived their time of great distress.

In today's first Scripture, the disciples don't go out to the Gentiles **JUST** because the Jews would not listen. Rather they go out because it is the plan of God that all be saved. With Jesus we must recognize that those on AMBER ALERT in terms of their faith have been given to us just as the Father has given them to Jesus. TRICKLE DOWN is not sufficient. There is an urgency. The Shepherd seeks out those who may feel separated....

- the divorced
- the grieving
- the children – parents busy with children
- the over-worked
- our teens and young adults.

We cannot wait we must seek them out, and let them know there is an open door and the place they once filled remains open to them.

This is often also called Vocation Sunday as well as Good Shepherd Sunday. Reaching out is our vocation! Feeding and tending the lambs is our vocation! And these days they are usually not just 'little children'. They are our grown-up family members and neighbors. Think of them when you hear as we leave today "Go to love and serve the Lord," and then respond, "Thanks be to God!" TRICKLE DOWN isn't enough; they may be on AMBER ALERT.