

Fourth Sunday of Easter – May 8th 2022

A Reflection by Fr Sylvester O’Flynn OFM Cap., Rochestown, Cork

Your vocation to be missionary

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is called Vocations Sunday, and each year the Gospel is about Christ the Good Shepherd and the flock of his followers. Today’s reading is short enough to quote it in full. “Jesus said: ‘The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life; they will never be lost, and no one will ever steal them from me. The Father who gave them to me is greater than anyone, and no one can steal them from the Father. The Father and I are one’” (John 10: 27-30).

As a visitor to the Holy Land, I experienced little drops of serendipity, moments of happy surprise which gave new richness to reading Scripture. One was in hearing a little child cry out to Abba, Daddy. Up to then my mind new what Abba meant but now my heart knew it too. It was Abba who gave his flock to Jesus and no one can steal them from Abba.

Another moment, seeing a shepherd on the hillside leading the sheep, not behind them on a tractor but walking in front of them. Writers about the Holy Land have been intrigued by the various calls and whistles that the shepherds use and how the sheep respond to them. Several different flocks may be intermingled overnight in the same stockade. Morning will present no problem in sorting out the flocks. Each shepherd has his peculiar call and straightaway his flock, and only his flock, will follow him. “The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me.” It is a family relationship.

Do not be misled by false shepherds

Whose voice do I follow? Who inspires my beliefs, ideals, aspirations, standards or fashions? Competing calls make it difficult to listen to the voice of the Risen Lord. There can be no discernment of God’s call without the control of our mental diet. One’s physical health is greatly dictated by what we eat and drink. Spiritually, our attentiveness to God is only as healthy as our mental diet. Do I avail of inspirational spiritual reading? Or do I spend vapid hours before the television or internet? Am I aware of the huge influence of the modern mass media? People are seriously misled by false shepherds who have completely changed what is meant by truth. Truth has always been understood as the coordination of the mind with real facts. But the manipulators of the mass media treat truth as something pliable to what I want to promote. So, we have fake news, slogans and conspiracy theories that play on the fears and anxieties of people. Pope Google is not a very reliable shepherd to follow when it comes to religion. Even a blatant lie is accepted when it is repeated over and over again. As we know today, truth is the first victim in every war. Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?” but he did not wait for an answer.

The Lord is my shepherd

One of my favourite places in the Holy Land is Tabgha, reputed to be where the miraculous catch of fish took place. Beside the lake there are statues of Jesus and Peter. Peter is kneeling in humble contrition for his denials but Jesus is reaching out to him offering the shepherd’s staff or crozier. “Feed my lambs, feed my sheep”. Some days later, when the forty days of preparation were complete at the Ascension of the Lord, he sent all the disciples to bring his message to the ends of the earth. At the end of the sacrament of baptism, light is taken from the Easter candle to light the candle of the new Christian. This is the beginning of a mission.

The universal call to holiness

For long centuries we have had a Church dominated by clergy. Sixty years ago, at the Second Vatican Council a very significant change of direction was expressed in emphasising the universal call to holiness. In the sacrament of baptism every Christian receives a vocation to bring the light of Christ to others. It has been said that it takes a hundred years for the ideas of an Ecumenical Council to be fully implemented. All the popes since the Council have spoken of the vocation of all Christians but it appears that now is the time for the idea to take fire. It has been forced on us by the belated recognition that clericalism facilitated the abuse and exploitation of people. This, in turn, was a factor in the rapid decline in the numbers entering the priesthood and religious life.

Vocation of baptism

For many years, on this Vocations Sunday, like the vast majority of priests, I preached about the vocation to the priesthood and consecrated life. I realise now my mistake in neglecting the vocation to all who are baptized to fan into flame the charisms of being Christened and the mission at the end of Mass to go out to serve the Lord.

Pope Francis issues a strong call to all Christians to be Spirit-filled evangelizers, fearlessly open to the working of the Holy Spirit. It is not simply that I have a mission, but he says, "I am a mission. That is the reason why I am here on earth" (*The Joy of the Gospel*, 273). He has invited us to participate in a worldwide synod to discern where the Holy Spirit is leading us to set the world on fire with the light of Christianity. A synod literally means walking together, gathering with others to talk and listen in a spirit of discerning where God is leading us. Let us trust in the Spirit of the Lord to guide us where to cast our nets.

Prayer for the Synod

We stand before you, Holy Spirit, as we gather in Your name.

With You alone to guide us, make Yourself at home in our hearts; teach us the way we must go and how we are to pursue it.

We are weak and sinful; do not let us promote disorder. Do not let ignorance lead us down the wrong path, nor may partiality influence our actions.

Let us find You in our unity so that we may journey together to eternal life and not stray from the way of truth and what is right.

All this we ask of You, who are at work in every place and time, in the communion of the Father and Son, forever and ever. Amen.