



Bible Reflection on Vocations

2017 is the PANAM Zone Year for Divine Word Vocations. Each month throughout this year, the biblical reflection will focus on a passage related to vocation awareness, discernment and promotion. In each reflection, the Bible Committee will make use of the five steps of *lectio divina*: read, meditate, pray, contemplate and act.

May 2017 — The Shepherd and the Sheep

1. *Read*

John 10:1-10

Jesus said: “Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever does not enter a sheepfold through the gate but climbs over elsewhere is a thief and a robber. But whoever enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens it for him, and the sheep hear his voice, as the shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has driven out all his own, he walks ahead of them, and the sheep follow him, because they recognize his voice. But they will not follow a stranger; they will run away from him, because they do not recognize the voice of strangers.” Although Jesus used this figure of speech, the Pharisees did not realize what he was trying to tell them.

So Jesus said again, “Amen, amen, I say to you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. A thief comes only to steal and slaughter and destroy; I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.”

(Gospel reading of the Fourth Sunday of Easter –
Cycle A, May 7, 2017)

2. *Meditate*

In the summer and fall of 1983, I participated in the Biblicum's study program in the Holy Land. One day we had an opportunity to follow the Wadi Qelt down to the city of Jericho. The path was narrow and often quite steep. Along the way we got caught in a rather strange "traffic jam." Two shepherds with their flocks of sheep met going in opposite directions. One flock approached us from the front, another from the back. We were in the midst of them as perhaps one hundred sheep or more mingled and bleated and pushed against each other and even sometimes got turned around. There was total confusion. Each shepherd went a little ahead and stopped at a certain point in order to wait for his flock to join him. One of the shepherds actually sat down and pulled out a small flute from his pocket. As he began to play the flute, the sheep quickly and eagerly went to him. Within a few moments the confusion and chaos ended as each flock gathered around its own shepherd and then continued on its way.

The Fourth Sunday of Easter, sometimes known as Good Shepherd Sunday, is also the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. The Gospel reading identifies Jesus as both the shepherd and the gate of the sheep.

Shepherds and sheep are familiar images in the Holy Land – both now as well as in the days of Jesus, David and Abraham. The Bible frequently mentions shepherds (115 times in the New American Bible) and sheep (212 times). Sheep and goats were an essential part of the Holy Land's economy, since they provided meat, milk, wool, leather and parchment. Normally they graze over a wide expanse of land (the grass can be sparse), and they are practically defenseless against predators. So the shepherd and his/her dog were necessary for the survival of the flock.

The shepherd became an easily understood metaphor for rulers and pastors. In fact, the English word "pastor" comes from the Latin word *pastor*, which means "shepherd."

Israel's ancestors (Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah and Rachel) were all shepherds. Israel's most famous king (David) was also a shepherd. Throughout the Ancient Near East the monarch was viewed as a kind of shepherd who guided and protected the nation. Kings and other political and religious leaders were expected to protect the sheep and not prey upon them.

According to the prophet Ezekiel, God condemned Judah's leaders who served themselves rather than their sheep (Ezek 34:1-10). God promises to be Judah's shepherd: "I myself will look after and tend my sheep. As a shepherd tends his flock when he finds himself among his scattered sheep, so will I tend my sheep. ...I myself will pasture my sheep; I myself will give them rest, says the Lord God. The lost I will

seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal.” (Ezek 34:11-12, 15-16).

God is often described as a shepherd in the Bible. Without doubt the most famous depiction of God as shepherd comes in Psalm 23:1: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” Jacob also uses shepherd imagery in describing God: “the God who has been my shepherd from my birth to this day” (Gen 48:15). Psalm 80:1 addresses God in the following way: “Shepherd of Israel, listen, guide of the flock of Joseph!”

Jesus, too, is identified as a shepherd in the New Testament. In Matthew, Jesus insists that “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 15:24). The Last Judgment is described as a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats (Matt 25:32).

In the Gospel of John, Jesus identifies himself as the Good Shepherd and as the gate for the sheep (John 10:1-16). In this passage the relationship of Jesus to his disciples is compared to that between a shepherd and his sheep: “the sheep hear his voice, as he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out” (v.3); “the sheep follow him, because they recognize his voice” (v.4); “I know mine and mine know me” (v.14).

We might have some difficulty imagining an “intimate” relationship between shepherd and sheep, but Jesus does not seem to have this problem. Disciples, like sheep, know their master because they have spent time with him and have listened to his voice.

Similarly, the master – like a good shepherd – has spent time with the disciples and knows them well. There is a bond of love, loyalty and trust in the relationship between our Savior and ourselves that can only be described in terms of that relationship between a shepherd and his sheep.

The pastoral minister (bishop, priest, deacon, religious sister or brother, or lay minister) is also expected to imitate the Good Shepherd. Anyone who does not do so will be considered a thief or a robber. A good shepherd does not run away when the wolf comes, nor does a good pastor run away from his or her responsibilities when there are difficulties, complaints, disappointments, failures or persecutions (John 10:12).

The one ministering to God’s people must have a real concern for the members of the Church – and even for those outside the Church (10:16). Just as Jesus laid down his life, so must those who lead the Christian community be willing to lay down their lives for those whom they serve (v. 15).

Becoming such a shepherd may not seem very inviting in this day and age because of the demands of the position. Despite that, Jesus continues to invite disciples to shepherd God’s people and to preach the Gospel: “It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and

appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you” (John 15:16).

Jesus commands us, “Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid” (John 14:27), and promises us an Advocate who will help us in our mission and our service to others (John 14:16-18, 25).

3. *Pray*

A Prayer for More Good Shepherds

Jesus, you came into this world as the good shepherd seeking out the lost. You started the Church so that your disciples might continue your work. Now we beg you:

- *Send more workers into your harvest fields!*
- *Bless your Church with worthy priests and religious.*
- *Support with your grace all those whom you have chosen from all eternity for your service and who now are answering your call.*
- *Reassure and strengthen your faithful servants in their vocation.*
- *Assist them in everything they begin in your name.*
- *Make them the salt of the earth which resists all corruption.*
- *Make them the light of the world so that Christians and non-Christians alike may be inspired by their words and example.*

Fill them with wisdom of mind and strength of will to increase your glory by extending your kingdom to every nation and by leading all people under their care to eternal life. Amen.

(Vademecum SVD)

4. *Contemplate*

Thank God for the bishops, priests, deacons and religious men and women in your life who helped you to become who you are today.

5. *Act*

Watch these two short YouTube videos that illustrate the bond between a shepherd and the sheep who know his voice:

- “The Good Shepherd and His Sheep”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Coq_grSFlns (3 minutes 44 seconds)
- “Do Sheep Only Obey Their Master’s Voice?”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e45dVgWgV64> (2 minutes)

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