

4th SUNDAY OF EASTER – A (April 30, 2023)

This fourth Sunday of Easter is also known as “Good Shepherd Sunday”—highlighting the fact of the risen Christ being our shepherd and leader. Jesus affirms his shepherding role throughout chapter ten of John’s gospel (the source of today’s passage). St. Peter in the second reading reminds us that, after having ‘gone astray like sheep’, we ‘have now returned to the shepherd and guardian of [our] souls’; that is, to Christ. And we affirmed our trust in the Lord our Shepherd in today’s responsorial—the well-known 23rd Psalm.

What happens when we really allow the risen Christ to be our shepherd; when we choose to follow him, and do so with joy, with conviction, and with gratitude? Amazing things can and do happen when we make that conscious decision to follow Jesus, to allow ourselves to be shepherded by him, and when we affirm and reaffirm that decision every day. One of those amazing things is that we receive the gift of courage—also known as fortitude, one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The U.S. Catholic Catechism describes fortitude as the virtue ‘by which one courageously and firmly chooses the good despite difficulty’; it also helps us to persevere ‘in doing what is right despite temptation, fear, or persecution.’”

St. Peter himself is a great example of this virtue in action. Remember how he bragged to Jesus at the Last Supper that he would never deny him? We know what happened: after Jesus was arrested, Peter ran away in fear and even lied three times in claiming he didn’t even know Jesus. But then recall our first reading: Peter is now preaching to thousands of people the fact that ‘God has made both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified’; he also urged them to turn away from their sins and be baptized. And he preached this same message fearlessly for many years until he himself suffered a martyr’s death in 64 A.D. What changed Peter from craven coward to the unstoppable witness to Jesus? It’s quite simple: Peter saw and heard the risen Christ, and he then received with the others with him the gifts of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost—including that gift of fortitude, of courage.

The history of the Church gives countless examples of those who show us the power of that gift of courage and the amazing things that gift allowed them; I offer two for your reflection:

--this past Friday, April 28, was the feast of St. Peter Chanel. He was a French priest of the early 1800’s who heard the call to missionary work and went to the island of Futuna in the Pacific Ocean. He and his companion were well received by the people. But when they began to speak about Jesus and the Christian faith, the local leader grew jealous—especially when his own son wanted to be baptized. He sent a band of warriors to kill Peter Chanel; they did so on April 28, 1841. It has long been said that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church; that certainly was the case in Futuna—within a few months of Chanel’s death, the whole island had become Christian. He was canonized in 1954. How did a simple French priest end up halfway around the world, preaching the gospel of Christ to a people whose language he had to learn from scratch, and being willing to do so even though it led to his violent death? It’s quite simple: he committed himself to Jesus Christ, followed him as his Shepherd, and lived and shared the gospel as Jesus led him—and he did so with the Holy Spirit’s gift of courage.

--the other example: yesterday, April 29, was the feast of the fourteenth-century St. Catherine of Siena (in modern-day Italy). She didn't face a martyr's death like Peter Chanel, but her story is no less remarkable. Early in life she was drawn to a life of prayer; she also ministered to the sick and hospitalized with great love and devotion. In the late 1300's, by which time the popes had resided in France instead of Rome for many decades, Catherine urged Pope Gregory XI to return the papacy to Rome where St. Peter himself had served and was martyred. She died in 1380 at the age of 33 and was canonized in 1461. How was this young woman from a humble family able to have such great influence in the Church of her time and even to the point of convincing the pope himself of changes that he needed for his own good and for that of the whole Church? It's quite simple: she committed herself to Jesus Christ, followed him as her Shepherd, and lived and shared the gospel as Jesus led her—and she did so with the Holy Spirit's gift of courage.

Am I saying that we all need to go preach the gospel in the Pacific Islands like St. Peter Chanel, or go to Rome and urge Pope Francis to do what we think he needs to do like St. Catherine of Siena with the pope of her time? Of course not, though we might want to urge him to give us a new archbishop ASAP... God calls us live out our faith in Christ the Good Shepherd with joy, with conviction, and with gratitude—and he calls us to do so by courageously using the unique combination of gifts and talents that he has given to every single one of us. And we have all received the Holy Spirit's gift of courage at our baptism and confirmation.

Where do you need that Spirit's gift of courage? Maybe to speak your concern to a loved one who is hurting him/herself by their conduct...or to speak the words "I'm sorry; please forgive me" to someone who you have hurt by your words or actions...or to say to those who reject or ridicule our faith, our Church, and our Savior: "I believe in Jesus and in the Church he gave us to help us know what is good". No doubt about it: it takes courage to follow Jesus the Good Shepherd and to do so with real joy, conviction, and gratitude. But that courage is available to us. As we expressed it in our responsorial psalm about the Lord who is our Shepherd: "He guides me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk in the dark valley I fear no evil; for you are at my side with your rod and your staff that give me courage." There is nothing to fear; he gives us all the courage we need just like he did with St. Peter Chanel, St. Catherine of Siena, and all the saints. It's there for the asking...so let's not be afraid to ask!