The Good Shepherd

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The scriptures use the image of God as the shepherd of Israel, reflecting on the life style of ancient Israel, still practiced in the area. In today’s reading, Jesus calls himself the “Good shepherd.” The depiction of sheep is innocent and docile, needing total protection and care of its owner. God called young David from tending sheep to be the shepherd of his people. The symbol of Good Shepherd could have its roots in in King David. David’s resume included risking his own life to protect and save his flock of sheep, fighting lions and bears. With such devout experience as a shepherd, it was easier transitioning to be a shepherd of his people. He also risked his life, fighting Goliath to save his people. Jesus used the same image of endangering oneself on behalf of his sheep, us.

Coming from rural and farming family, I was not good at tending animals, cows, sheep or goats. Some of my siblings and cousins were very good at it. For them the saddest time was when our parents sold or killed a lamb or goat. I remember my brother would never eat, if the meat came from our flock. A very good trait of a shepherd. The word “pastor” means” one who leads animals: sheep, cows, and goats to the field to graze. This best expressed in Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I lack. In green pastures you let me graze; to safe waters you lead me; you restore my strength” (1-2).

Jesus also compares the bad shepherd against the good one. According to Jesus, a bad shepherd focuses on his wages not on the safety of the sheep. He does not care. Sheep are defenseless and easily disoriented if they do not have the right protection and care. Reminding Church leaders of their vocation, Pope Francis said, “You should smell like the sheep.” In the parable of the lost sheep, finding his lost sheep the owner carried it on his shoulder. There is no doubt he smelled like the sheep he carried on his shoulder. The sheep could recognize their owners by smell and voice.

Using the symbol of a shepherd, Jesus is in solidarity with the shepherds, who occupy a marginalized profession. People’s attitude to such profession has not changed since the time of Jesus or the early church. The Gospel tell us that the shepherds were the first to hear the good news, the birth Jesus, the Savior. [Even the romanticized “American Cowboy” occupation is not as desirable in practice as its myth.] Quoting from Psalms, St. Peter alludes the marginalization of Jesus in the Acts of the Apostles, firs reading, “He is the stone rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone.” A wisdom of God considered as folly or unknown to the world, yet those of us who believed are “to be called the children of God.” By his death and resurrection, pulled in from the marginal orbit to the center of divine gravity as “Beloved Children of God.”