

LECTIO for Fourth Sunday of Easter (Jn. 10:11-18)

This passage from John's Gospel is so rich that it could easily be the subject of a whole course, or even a book, on the Fourth Gospel — not only because of its content and its literary style, and its Christo-centric spirituality, — but also, and especially, because of its theology of the Resurrection which is the context in which we are engaging it on this Fourth Sunday of Easter. I hope it will soon be clear why a discourse of Jesus presented as having been given during his public life, in the very middle of the Gospel in chapter 10, long before the Paschal Mystery of his death and Resurrection, rather than some Easter or Post-Easter episode, like an appearance narrative, is chosen for this Easter season Sunday. The passage is not an abstract theological discourse but a teaching, presented as coming from the pre-Easter Jesus, but actually telling us, the readers, what the Resurrection of Jesus, what Easter, effects, brings about, in *our* pre-death Christian experience

Let me say a few things first about this passage as literature before we look specifically at its contribution to our understanding of and experience of the Resurrection in our “here and now.” The text, the literature, is not just a vehicle of information. It is the verbal incarnation of the Mystery of God in Jesus for us, as his earthly bodily life was for his contemporaries.

This passage is easily recognized as one of the great “I am” pericopes in John's Gospel. Seven times in this Gospel the pre-Easter Jesus is presented as describing himself to his earthly interlocutors, with the expression “I am...” followed by a metaphorical predicate. Of course, we recognize right away that “I am” is God's own mysterious name, given by God to Moses at the burning bush theophany when Moses asks the One commissioning him to lead God's people to freedom, “Who are you?” so that he could present the enslaved people with his divine credentials. God replies: tell the people, “‘I am’ has sent me to you.” (Ex. 3:14). “I

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am” in the absolute is God’s “name”. God is a subjective verb, pure act, not a thing that can be denoted by a noun.

But in John’s Gospel the great “I am” appears not in or as the Absolute, the utterly Other, but in the person of a mortal, Jesus, who thus qualifies it when he uses it of himself with finite metaphors: I am light, I am life, water, bread, Shepherd, way, truth, and finally, most stunningly, Resurrection and Life, so that we can understand, at least in some measure, who God is, not in Godself, but for us. There is so much to say about both this incarnational linguistic technique of revelation by divine self-identification in John and the substance of the identifications, but in a brief reflection we can only raise up a couple points for meditation, knowing that we can and hopefully will spend a life-time exploring this material.

In discussing our liturgical passage for this Sunday, which I’m hoping you will see in light of what Bonnie shared with us last week about the bodily Resurrection of Jesus, I want to concentrate on the “I am” saying of today’s Gospel. Jesus says, “I am the Good Shepherd.” And Jesus explains what the “good” refers to by a contrast. Unlike the hired hand, i.e., the one who is not truly a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, but who is tending someone else’s sheep, and really cares only for his salary, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, not only tends the sheep, but says, stunningly, that he will lay down his life for them. The Good Shepherd actually prefers the sheep to himself! To the point of actually giving his life for them! Amazing.

A recent remark of Pope Francis to pastoral ministers has been rather ludicrously—but very instructively—misinterpreted. Francis said that one characteristic of a good shepherd, a true pastor, as opposed to a hireling, an ecclesiastical functionary, is that a true shepherd has the “smell of the sheep.” Some took this to mean that the shepherd knows the sheep by smell or that the sheep can find their own shepherd by smell. Perhaps such interpreters were delicately shying away from what Francis was plainly saying, namely, that close association with sheep, who are notoriously malodorous animals, makes the shepherd smell LIKE the sheep, which is why shepherds in Jesus’ time were not welcome in polite society.

When God chose to dwell among us, God in Jesus took on the “smell of the sheep,” the stench of sinful humanity, namely, mortality rather than the odor of sanctity which is God’s very nature. The pastoral minister who reigns over the people to whom he or she is sent rather than truly recognizing him or herself as one of them, the minister who thinks he does not “smell” (or should we say stink?) as “those people” in the pews do, is not a shepherd at all but a phony, a pretender, a paid stand-in whose own the sheep are not, basically a hireling whom the “sheep,” showing very un-sheeplike insight, do not recognize as their shepherd. And how much worse is the imitation shepherd who believes himself to be, wants to be considered as, even “ontologically,” superior to the smelly sheep, and expresses that self-conceit by the way he or she dresses, likes to be addressed, where he lives or who she associates with.

But Jesus goes much further than the issue of identification with the sheep, through actual incarnation among them. He says that the “Good Shepherd,” unlike the hireling, will actually lay down his life for the sheep, prefer the sheep’s well-being and life to his own — which the amazing story of Jesus’ salvific career proves Jesus to be truly the Good Shepherd.

But there is something else about this shepherd in John’s Gospel. He is not merely identified with the sheep by his care for them, willing if need be, to lay down his life for them. He is, in John’s language, actually, himself, the sacrificial “Lamb of God.” He actually came, not just to tend the sheep, but to freely lay down his life, to “take away the sin of the world.” This is a pattern in John’s Christology captured in the lapidary “I am” sayings of Jesus. He not only offers the Samaritan Woman water; he identifies himself as the “living water.” He not only produces food for the multitude in the wilderness but gives himself as “bread of life”. In other words, Jesus not only offers us the “gifts of God.” He becomes for us the “Gift of God.” And he tells us that it is only if we can recognize, in and through and beyond all God’s good gifts the One True Gift of God whom He is will we have entered into salvation as this Gospel presents it. The Gift *from* God is the Gift *of* God, that is, the Gift who *is* God.

But what has this theology of identification of God's self-gift in Jesus in and through historical, material reality to do with the Resurrection that we are celebrating? Basically, it is a concrete, oft-repeated assertion that salvation is offered to us, comes to us, must be received by us, not through correct belief in dogmas or by properly performed religious practices or the keeping of moral laws. Salvation in John's theology (which is not called redemption in John but always salvation; not buying us back but rescuing us) is not a transaction either of us with God or of God with Satan on our behalf. Salvation is the free gift of a relationship of which we could not even have dreamed, much less sought, cultivated, or forged. Who could imagine, really, a shepherd who would freely lay down his own one and only life to save the life of a sheep? But that is how John presents Jesus' salvific work — God, in Jesus, laying down his one and only human life to save even one of us from eternal death?

We can tend to imagine (if not actually think) that Jesus, going freely to his death in our stead, knew that the Passion would only last three days and everything would be back to normal. But the human Jesus faced real human death, not as an episode in a Passion Play that he knew would end when the curtain came down. Jesus, we have to believe, knew that he was commending himself into the hands of God whom he knew and trusted loved him more than he could have loved himself and whose love for those whom God had created, who were now his own sisters and brothers in human flesh, was stronger than death itself. But Jesus, the human being who freely laid down his one and only human life for his friends, had not read the script ahead of time. He knew, as all dying believers do, that he was commending his life into the hands of the One he called Father; that no evil could finally triumph over God's love for him. But he was also a real human being who knew that death was the end of what we know as life, and as the Good Shepherd, he chose death rather than abandon the flock God had entrusted to him. In other words, as I have been trying to say, the Incarnation, as John presents it, is real. Jesus' life was not a Passion Play. Humanity was not a costume for Jesus. Calvary was not a stage. Jesus, like us, faced real human death and like us had never, as a human being,

experienced any life other than human life. The curtain would not go down and everyone/everything backstage be as it had always been.

Jesus does not say, in John, “I am like water poured out or like bread consumed,” “I am like a shepherd who dies for his flock,” but “I *am* living water; I *am* living bread; I *am* the true shepherd; I *am* life and Resurrection.” This is not textual literalism but symbolic realism. A true symbol, as opposed to a sign, is not a stand-in for something other than itself, like an exit sign standing for a door which would still be a sign even it were not placed above a real door and would not make a door exist by signifying it. But, a true symbol, like own bodies, is a way of being, of being present, of something that cannot otherwise present itself, be experienced. Jesus is not *like* a shepherd and his execution is not *like* death. He *is* a shepherd who *really* lays down his one and only human life for his friends. In other words, what we are dealing with here is the reality of the Incarnation, of the real God in Jesus, choosing to be among us as truly one of us, to have the real smell (the stench of temporal decay) of the real sheep. And this entailed his real death.

Jesus, in John, interestingly, does not tell parables. He does not talk about what he is *like for us*. He tells us what, who He *is for us*. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And he asks us, as he asked his first century disciple, Martha, after telling her that her dead brother Lazarus lives (cf. Jn. 11:23-27) “Do you believe this?”

Taking seriously this realism of symbolic or sacramental presence, that is, the Incarnation of God- with-us, brings us into the sphere of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Bonnie talked about this last week. And I want to push it even a little further. Or invite us a little further into this mystery which the Church claims is the heart and substance of Christian faith. As Paul says, “If Christ is not risen, we are of all people the most to be pitied.” Why? People had gotten along for eons before the coming of Jesus without an inkling of bodily Resurrection. It is because we, unlike those who never knew Jesus, would have staked our life on a fairy tale, a myth, something that has never happened because it never could happen and never will happen.

We, as Christians, do not base our Christian faith in the immortality of the soul (which is a valid natural philosophical thesis that does not depend on revelation) but on something that could never be or be thought of in the framework of the purely natural, that could only be accessible to us *by* revelation, *as* divine revelation, in the strict sense of the word. I am not talking about resuscitation of a corpse (whether or not one thinks such a thing could or ever will happen). That is why I prefer to talk not of “the resurrection of the body” (which tends to suggest resuscitation of a corpse, and raises issues that incite to incredulity if not absurdity) but to talk rather of bodily resurrection — that is, of the mode of resurrection, not of what is raised, — a *way* of eternal life occurring, rather than what is eternal. *What* is raised is the person who died. *How* the person is raised is in the full integrity of their body-person which, difficult as it is for us to imagine, can be thought of — and I believe occurs — non-physically. In other words, what might be accomplished by death is the release of the human being not from bodiliness but from the physicality of earthly bodiliness. If death is the passage of the person into the fullness of the life of God, which is not physical, perhaps it can be thought of not physically, but rather as eternal life is in God who was never anything but purely spiritual, who could not perish because there is in God nothing perishable. Perhaps Resurrection can be understood as the new enlivening of the human person in the full integrity of their bodiliness who has really died in the Risen Jesus, not as a disincarnate spirit nor as a resuscitated corpse, but as a truly risen, that is necessarily bodily risen, person now living the eternal life of God.

How this can be is not something we can reason to or explain. That it is, that it took place in Jesus who assures us that it will take place in us, is something we could only access through faith in divine revelation. And that is exactly what the Resurrection narratives give us access to: not a video of divine Revelation. Something we could never have dreamed up and cannot imagine in the literal sense of that word. But something we know is real because it has already occurred in Jesus. In John we read that, this is why the Father loves Jesus: because he went through this process, this real experience of real human death, to reveal our real destiny to

us. “This is why the Father loves me, because I laid down my life to take it up again”
—because I died to reveal the Resurrection.

And it is to that occurrence, the bodily Resurrection of the real, once-historical but now trans-historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified and died under Pontius Pilate, that our Gospel testifies on the authority of God: that Jesus, who is both the Lamb of God sacrificed on the cross and the eternal Good Shepherd who guarantees the life of his flock, is alive with God, now, in the full integrity of his glorified humanity. And that, to those of us who believe in Him, He will grant, has already granted, a share, through his Spirit, in his eternal life, which is and always will be the eternal life of the human being, Jesus. We, like Him, are not immortal. Like him, we will die. But, because we are his flock, the sheep for whom he has laid down his human life, we are also sharers in his bodily Resurrection, his taking, as an integral human being, of his eternal divine life. As he said to Martha, just before, not after, raising Lazarus from the dead, “I am the Resurrection and the Life....do you believe this?” And we are challenged to respond, and gifted to respond, like Martha, “Yes Lord, I believe.”