

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

“Guilty” three times came the verdict to former police officer Derek Chauvin. The Catholic bishops of the United States this week issued a statement, which says in part, “The death of George Floyd highlighted and amplified the deep need to see the sacredness in all people, but especially those who have been historically oppressed.... As we have seen so plainly this past year, social injustices still exist in our country, and the nation remains deeply divided on how to right those wrongs.... Let us pray that... God strengthen... us to cleanse our land of the evil of racism which also manifests in ways that are hardly ever spoken, ways that never reach the headlines. Let us then join in the hard work of peacefully rebuilding what hatred and frustration have torn down.” The bishops offer helpful resources on their web site.

The police are supposed to prevent crimes, not commit them. They are to be good shepherds, not like the hired man Jesus calls out in today’s gospel, who “works for pay and has no concern for the sheep.” All of us are to exercise our responsibilities not to satisfy ourselves but to show concern for others.

In the Catholic Church Good Shepherd Sunday is a day we traditionally pray for vocations to the priesthood. In our diocese this year it is juxtaposed with tomorrow’s Day of Prayer in Atonement and for the Healing of All Those Harmed by Sexual Abuse. Our annual observance expresses remorse for the crimes committed by some of our priests, shepherds who should have been good.

Most people pursue positions of authority because they want to make a difference, be they politicians, police or priests. Sometimes something goes wrong. People get dangerously distracted from taking care of others.

God has appointed each of us as a shepherd over some others as a parent, a best friend, a teacher, or a mentor. We have responsibility for them. Jesus gives an egregious example of an irresponsible shepherd: When danger approaches the flock, such as the unexpected appearance of a wolf, the hired man runs for his life, leaving the sheep in the jaws of death. A good shepherd stares down the wolf. A good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

Jesus’ interpretation of shepherding was new. In the past, good shepherds were virtuous leaders, but they did not necessarily die for their sheep. Jesus, of course, did. He modeled shepherding all the way to the cross. Far from taking the life of someone he came to protect, he gave his life for all.

It may be hard to imagine giving up your life for someone else, especially a stranger. Jesus determined to diminish the number of strangers. “I know mine,” he says, “and mine know me.” It’s much easier to protect someone you love.

We can counter our prejudices against Blacks, Asians, Muslims, Jews, Catholics, lawyers, or political parties with Jesus’ formula: Get to know people. Spend time hearing someone else’s story. Try to understand someone else’s perspective. Realize that God loves that person too. If we are to be good shepherds of others, including “other sheep who do not belong to this fold,” as Jesus puts it, we must lead them, not hate them, not kill them. If we are ready to lay down our lives for sheep no matter their fold, we can expect a different judgment from God at the end of our days: “Not guilty.”

Sunday, April 25, 2021