

Fourth Sunday of Easter – Year B – April 25, 2021

You have heard the phrase – “no good deed goes unpunished” – well here is a perfect example. Peter and John have been dragged off before the Sanhedrin, the highest court in Judaism. It had the power of arrest. The only thing it could not do was to pass a death sentence. Peter and John are being questioned about the healing of a lame man in the Beautiful Gate of the Temple. They had been in the Temple teaching the people about Jesus and the resurrection from the dead.

Who were the Sanhedrin? There were 71 members. The high-priest was an ex-officio president. Most of the priests were Sadducees who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. You see why they might be hostile to Peter and John’s message. It was a very politicized situation. In former times, the high priesthood was hereditary and for life. The Sadducees were in charge of the Temple and their continued privileged position depended on keeping the peace for the Romans. They wanted to keep the status quo. No innovative theology or Galilean Messiah for them.

By Roman times the office of high priest was the subject of intrigue, bribery and corruption. According to Barclay “between 37BCE and 67CE there were 28 high priests.” Often the ex-high priest would be the power behind the throne. All but 6 of the priests were connected to 4 priestly families. In addition to the Sadducees there were Pharisees, scribes and elders. This is the same body that turned Jesus over to the Romans.

You can see why Peter and John might well have been afraid of such a confrontation. But you would be wrong. It is the religious authorities who were put on the defensive. You see, Peter and John had direct experience with Jesus. They knew him personally. They saw the evidence of his resurrection. It was as undeniable as the man who had been a cripple now standing before them healed.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Peter answered their question directly and courageously. When he is asked by what power or name do you do this, he gets right to the point. First Peter makes sure that they are accusing him because of a good deed done to a sick man. The man has been cured by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Then Peter points out that this same Jesus was rejected by

them and handed over to the Romans to be crucified. But God intervened by raising Jesus from the dead. Now there is no salvation in any other name. This last statement is astounding. Maybe Peter remembered Jesus telling the disciples not to worry about their testimony before hostile authorities. God would in that hour give them words which could not be refuted. A little later the Sanhedrin, being at a loss in the face of the evidence, merely told the apostles not to speak in the name of God's son, Jesus Christ and love one another. It reminds me of Jesus' answer to the question of which is the greatest commandment. The greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.

For John, believing in the name of Jesus is crucial to our relationship with God and our neighbor. He frequently speaks of the importance of our belief in Jesus. Barclay says "when biblical writers use the word 'name' it is not mean the name by which a person is called. It means the whole nature and character of that person as far as it is known to us." To believe in the name of Jesus Christ is to accept him as he really is.

There is a second part of Jesus' commandment. We ought to lay down our lives for one another. We must love one another with the same selfless sacrificial, forgiving love with which Jesus loved us. How can we say we love Jesus if we hate another person or persons who after all are made in the image of God just as we are? John says "how does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help." So we see that to follow Jesus involves right belief and right conduct. Christian life is not a choice between piety and compassion, rather it is both together. As John encourages us "little children let us love not in word or speech but in truth and action."

The image of God as the Good Shepherd is depicted in the catacombs. Before Christianity was legal, Christians hid there so they could meet together. If a Roman spy should happen upon them all he would see is a shepherd with a lamb and he would not associate that with Christians.

The Hebrew Bible has many references to God as the Shepherd of Israel. For instance, Psalm 80 where God leads Joseph like a flock and Psalm 23. The prophets also have a great deal to say about unfaithful shepherds. "Woe to those

who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture.” (Jer. 23:1-4) Ezekiel also castigates the shepherds who seek their own welfare and neglect the flock.

Shepherds in the Holy Land actually do lead their sheep and their sheep follow them. Since the sheep were kept for their wool rather than meat, the shepherd had a close relationship with them. He calls them by name. They actually will not follow a stranger. The sheep need their shepherd to watch out for their needs – “to lead them beside still waters and green pastures.” He leads to be sure the path is safe for them. He fights off predators like wolves. He carries a rod and a staff. He is responsible for their safety.

The difference between a good shepherd and a bad one is their relationship with the animals. The good shepherd knows the sheep and loves them. They are sometimes with him for years. He takes his responsibilities to heart so that, if he has to, he will risk his life for his sheep.

By contrast, the bad shepherd may not even know his sheep. He is a hired hand. His pay is the most important thing to him. He does not care for the sheep but seeks his own welfare. So when predators attack the flock, he saves himself and runs away.

Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd. He says he lays down his life for the sheep. He seems to be preparing his disciples for his rejection, suffering, death and resurrection. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is presented as being always in charge, always in control. He knows what the future holds for him. He compares his relationship with his followers to his relationship to the Father. They know each other intimately. The reason that the Father loves him is because he “lays down his life in order to take it up again.”

This is an answer to the old question of who was responsible for Jesus’ death? The most obvious culprits are the Romans. Since early times in the church, the Jews were designated villains because their religious authorities rejected him. And then there is Judas, who betrayed him with a kiss. Lastly, we may blame ourselves because our sins necessitated his death.

This is not how Jesus speaks about it. He said about his life “no one takes it from me but I lay it down of my own accord.” He also says “I have received this command from my Father.” He was not a victim or a martyr.

So what does this mean for us personally? Because Jesus is our Good Shepherd we can be confident in his care for each one of us. He invites us to trust him and to come to know him intimately. It is hard for me to accept compassion that I don't feel I deserve. Never the less, that is what Jesus did for me when he willingly took on injustice, cruelty, betrayal and even death for all of us.

How can we possibly repay him?