

Homily - Fourth Sunday of Easter (Good Shepherd Sunday)

“Whoever lives in the presence of so good a friend and excellent a leader as is Jesus Christ can endure all things.

Christ helps us and strengthens us and never fails; he is a true friend.”

Those encouraging words were written by the great Carmelite Doctor of the Church, Saint Teresa of Avila, in her spiritual treatise *The Way of Perfection*, and they give us a beautiful image of the kind of relationship that Our Lord desires with each of us.

And it should also lead us to reflect on a question:

Do we have a friendship with Jesus?

It’s a more nuanced and layered question than it might seem at first.

That idea - that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, could be a true friend - is one which probably sounds good to us in the abstract but might challenge us in practice.

What does that kind of friendship look like?

The closest image we have, of course, is our earthly human friendships.

The philosopher Aristotle famously argued that there were three distinct kinds of friendships: friendships of utility, where the relationship was purely limited to some useful benefit you gain from each other; friendships based on the pleasure of each other’s company - in other words, people you like to spend time with for the sake of enjoyment; and finally, friendships based on virtue, which are the rarest and most valuable - friends who make you better people.

If we were to use this model of human friendship, which of these kinds of friendship would our friendship with the Lord resemble?

I would argue this may be a trick question, as our relationship with the Lord transcends these categories, just as Christ's own nature is not merely human, but also divine - and divine friendship is nothing less than sharing in love itself.

St. Thomas Aquinas, building on Aristotle's own ideas of friendship, would write that this is what we call the virtue of charity - "the friendship of man for God."

The wonderful thing about this divine friendship is that even though it is infinite in scope and transcendent in nature, Our Lord makes it accessible for us, even to the simplest souls.

In fact, today's Gospel image of the Good Shepherd is exactly this: an image of divine friendship, using the most earthy and humble of examples - the care of a faithful shepherd for his flock.

So what is it like to be friends with Jesus Christ?

It means to be in a relationship with one who saves and protects us - a good shepherd who lays down his life for his flock - faithful to the end.

This liturgical season of Easter has been all about unpacking that exact idea - that through his Resurrection, Our Lord has saved us from sin and led us to freedom.

We experience this as one flock - as his Body, the Church, united in our baptism and saved through his Paschal Mystery.

But again, that's not the only dimension of this friendship.

Our Lord tells us, "I know mine and mine know me."

This is meant to be a personal friendship, just as personal as with our closest companions, spouses, or children.

It means that like the sheep of the shepherd's flock, we learn to recognize his voice, a voice which speaks to us most of all in the silence of prayer.

I think it's good to remember that prayer is almost always uncomfortable at first.

If we don't know someone well, the first few conversations can be awkward.

We're still trying to get to know each other and decide if we like each other, have anything in common, or can get along with their personality.

The same is true of God - it's totally okay if the first few, or few dozen, or few hundred times we sit down to pray, it doesn't seem like a natural experience for us.

We're learning the Lord's personality. We're getting used to the way he speaks to us - and he will speak, just maybe not the way we imagined at a distance.

He will lead us, just as a shepherd leads his flock to the places where they will find the comfort and nourishment that they crave.

By way of analogy, I think we also know from experience that our human friendships and relationships grow or collapse depending on our commitment to quality time and communication.

It's good to think about our prayer that way.

What would a human friendship look like if we put as much time or effort into it as we do our life of prayer?

Do we make time and space for the important and difficult conversations? Do we set aside special time for those closest to us?

And if we do for those human relationships we value - why would we not do so for God?

The beautiful thing is that when we do, as Saint John writes in his letter, the Lord's friendship doesn't leave us unchanged, just the way he found us. Instead, he transforms us, makes us like himself - a transformation that will be brought to its ultimate fulfillment in eternal life.

As Saint Teresa of Avila said, he leads us and guides us - through good times and bad, consolation and desolation, the Cross and the Resurrection.

Our life will simply never be complete without this kind of friendship.

And honestly, why would we not want this for ourselves? For those we care about?

There's no substitute.

Saint Peter's preaching put it bluntly:

"There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved."

There is no true shepherd for our soul but the Good Shepherd.

And it is here, in the prayer of his Church, that he calls to us and teaches us to hear his voice.

Invite him to speak to you today in his Word and in this offering of this Blessed Sacrament, and to strengthen you in your needs.

And, most of all, allow him that chance to be your friend.