

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." The pastoral imagery of sheep and shepherds was a common one in our Lord's day. In many parts of the world it still is, although it is foreign to us. So, it might be a little hard for us to easily draw the relational parallels that are so much a part of traditional Christian imagery, but there is one thing from the sheep / shepherd imagery that we need to understand, and that is that the shepherd assumed total responsibility for the welfare of his sheep. He ensured that they were fed and given water. He cared for them when they were ill. He saw to it that they were safe from predators. The good shepherd took excellent care of his sheep. He protected them, even at his own risk, and brought them safely home.

Jesus considered his relationship with his disciples as analogous with that of a shepherd and his sheep. For the most part, sheep were helpless without their shepherd. While we might not feel helpless, and certainly we don't want to be considered helpless because that implies weakness, a theological reality is that on our own merit we fall way short of God's mark. This understanding of human spiritual inadequacy is fundamental to Christian religion. There is one way to redemption, in Christian understanding. If we are honest in our interpretation of what Holy Scripture says, and if we believe our baptismal creed, we know that Jesus is the one way to eternal life. In him alone we find our salvation. Jesus did not equivocate. Jesus said, "I am the door; if anyone enters by me, he will be saved." There is no other door.

What does it mean, then, to be the Lord's lamb and to find our home in God's eternal pasture? What does it mean to be baptized into the death and resurrection of the Son of God and to be his disciple? It means, first of all, that we must place our full trust and hope in Christ. It means that we must seriously strive to imitate Christ in each and every situation. Why? Because the goal of the Christian must be to live life in the most Christ-like way possible. So, this means that we need to be ready to follow Jesus, wherever he leads. We must be ready to do whatever he asks. It means that in the act of loving neighbor as he loved us, we willingly become his hands and his feet, his heart and his word – regardless of whatever personal price we pay for this obedience. Being a disciple means that we must be prepared to take up the cross. Discipleship comes with a price. Too often we don't understand this and are totally unwilling to be inconvenienced for the sake of God. It is in these moments that we sin.

Christians find, though, that the cost, the price of discipleship, which we pay by giving ourselves to the service of God in whichever way that God leads us, is a cost that seems more like a gift from God to us than the gift of ourselves to Him. This has been the Christian discovery throughout the ages. There is a reward that comes from living as Christ would have us live, from being true to his mandate that we serve others in his name. That reward is a very powerful sense of that we are living as we ought to live, doing as we ought to do, and that God is pleased with our efforts.

Jesus once said, "I came that you may have life and have it abundantly." The Christian does find life to be abundant and he doesn't have to wait for death to experience the joy of salvation. Life lived in faith is abundant here and now. *Amen.*