



## **Fourth Sunday of Easter – 21 April 2024: Reflection by Mgr Daniel McHugh**

***“I lay down my life for my sheep”*** (John 10:11)

I look at the post “Christian Art” written and illustrated by Father Van der Frequently Vorst. This week he reflected on a painting by Thomas Kennington of two children sleeping and a piece of bread before them on a plate. He told the story of the terrible hunger many orphan children experienced in World War 2: a story of children being not able to sleep because they feared waking up with nothing to eat. Psychologists directed the allied forces running camps to ensure the children had a piece of bread – to be held not eaten and they slept well; they trusted they were in good hands. Father Van der Vorst was reflecting on the Gospel where Jesus speaks of Himself as *“the Bread of life”*: as long as He is beside us He calms our fears. Those weren’t the exact words I used in my Homily at the Easter Monday Men’s Mass in St Chad’s Cathedral, but I did speak of the presence of the Tabernacle in my home where I pray for a short time morning and night. Jesus is truly present with us in the Eucharist, *“the Bread of Life”*.

The *“Good Shepherd”* image in the Gospel for the fourth Sunday is said to be the oldest depiction of Jesus in history says Bishop Stowe in a Homily for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter. It is a fresco to be found on a wall in the catacombs of St Priscilla in Rome, and dates back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century at the time of Church persecution under the Roman Empire. The “cuteness” of the Lamb on the Shepherd’s shoulders can lead us to overlook the danger of the context and the heroism of the Shepherd who is no “hired man”: His work is not just a job but a “mission” He receives from the Father. Early Christians needed, in their sufferings and trials, assurance of the nearness of the *“good shepherd”* who would rescue them, and lead them to restful waters and green pastures. The good shepherd remains with the sheep; he knows, loves and has hopes for the sheep. The comfort of the brave shepherd, says Stowe, appeals to us as it did to the early Christians.

The beloved shepherd is one of the many images Jesus chooses to describe Himself in the Gospels. So much of the imagery is from the created world that was familiar to people then: the danger of the wolves, the familiarity of the shepherd’s voice, the importance of the flock remaining together for safety. The significance of the Good Shepherd is extraordinary: he not only risks His life, but lays down His life for the flock. Stowe goes on to point out that the Latin word for Shepherd is Pastor: pastors must be both strong and gentle.

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Jesus says in the Gospel *“there are other sheep I have that are not this fold, and these I have to lead as well.”* Stowe points to the example of Pope Francis, a pastor who despite his pain and suffering in his legs and lungs reaches out to so many: he is willing to be wheeled into war zones to plead for peace or to pray for forgiveness in the midst of native peoples who have been harmed by the Church’s ministers who have been *“more like wolves than shepherds.”* Many pastors of other flocks see him as the “Universal Shepherd”: they listen to his voice on issues like climate change, care for the earth our common home, and issues around gender transition and assisted dying. He has courageously taken a lead too on Blessing for same sex couples that has caused a storm: personally I listen to his voice, the voice of a shepherd who really cares for his whole flock, especially the weak and vulnerable. If I’m concerned by the direction he is leading us in – have I fully understood it?

This Sunday, Good Shepherd Sunday, is traditionally the day we pray for vocations to the priesthood and contribute to the training fund established to support their years of study and formation. The challenge of the Priest to be a Pastor who stands with the flock to lead them to new pastures is an exciting one; He is called to be an inspiration to the faithful like Jesus the ‘Good Shepherd’. Let us turn in prayer to Mary, the Mother of the Good Shepherd, and ask her intercession for families especially that they may nurture priestly vocations. There is a Feast of Our Lady, Mother of the Good Shepherd, kept in many parts of the world on the Saturday after Good Shepherd Sunday. Capuchin Missions around the world are entrusted to Mary, Mother of the Good Shepherd; this is their prayer:

*“We entrust this great undertaking to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Good Shepherd, who gave birth to Christ, the light and salvation of all nations, and who, on the morning of Pentecost, overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, presided in prayer at the dawn of evangelisation.”*  
Amen.

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