

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Today is one of the most powerful and most recognizable images that we have of Jesus Christ. This has been so important to so many cultures around the world, because it is really one true image that all peoples everywhere can identify with. People in Scotland herd sheep, people in Greece herd sheep, people in Finland herd sheep, people in Nigeria have types of sheep, the nomads of the Middle East keep sheep. There are hundreds of different types of sheep all over the world and most have the same similar way of guarding over and protecting them from predators, namely the shepherd.

Have you ever really stopped to consider what a shepherd does? He lives in and among the sheep. A good shepherd can identify each ewe and knows which lamb or lambs belong to her, he knows her history, her daughters and their daughters. The sheep know that if there is danger lurking about, one bleat will bring their protector running. In Montana, the predator might be a grizzly bear, a coyote, or a mountain lion. On the Nigerian plains, it might be a hyena, a lion or a vulture.

A shepherd sleeps few hours, especially during the lambing season. He needs to be ready at a moments notice to help a ewe in trouble to deliver her babies. Often he has to be a surrogate mom if she has more babies that she can care for. A shepherd often lives a solitary life alone in a small hut that he can move from place to place as he takes his flock on his seasonal rounds from lower grounds to higher grounds and greener pastures, and

then back again in the winter season. To the sheep, a shepherd is the life source of the herd, all he has to do is call and they come running.

The question for me was, how do the first and second readings of today fit in with the Gospel of the Good Shepherd, and I had to think and pray hard and long to see the common element in each. For me, the common element was Grace.

In the first lesson, we have the retelling of the story of the early apostles and their early days and the power that Miss Holy Spirit had bestowed upon them and *that great grace was upon them all*.

What then is grace? According to Webster, grace is: unmerited divine assistance given man for his regeneration or sanctification. In Harpers Bible Commentary, Grace is given many definitions, including, the Greek translation of that which brings delight, joy, happiness or good fortune. The Hebrew translation from the root word meaning favor, as in, Noah found favor before the Lord. In the Apocrypha, Grace is synonymous with Divine Mercy on the elect.

Where the actual vocabulary of Grace is absent, God's actions are suffused with Grace. God loved Israel and he continued to honor the covenant that he made with them despite all of the problems they created through their whining, selfishness and greed. It seems to me that Grace is really synonymous with love.

Today's second lesson immediately brings grace to mind when as John begins: See what love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called the children of God. This is pretty simply stated in this translation, but in the New International Version, it translated like this: How great the love the Father has lavished on us. What a wonderfully expressive description of the actions of God the Father. How *great* the love the Father has *lavished* on us. Does not the word lavish really bring to mind a total envelopment in the love of God, which would thus fill us with grace?

Christ used the image of the Good Shepherd as a way to explain the grace of God in a way that his followers could understand. The image of a shepherd was not foreign to them and they would understand the sacrifices, the dedication, the love and the pure unselfishness that is required of a Shepherd. I don't think that, in those early times, the Apostles would have been able to understand the concept of grace. Today, even with the history that has been created over the last two thousand years, we still only just begin to fathom the depth of grace and love that God has bestowed on us. Through the work of translators, theologians, mystics and the writings of the apostles, we have some idea of what grace is, but because we are human, our minds are limited; we cannot really and truly comprehend the magnitude of God's Grace or Love.

What we can do however is to take the image of the Good Shepherd with us, as a reminder that God is the one that loves and protects us, that his grace is that which gives us life and sustains us, and that we are his sheep and he knows each of us by name.