Quantum Sheep

Easter 4

May 12th, 2019

There is an old Russian proverb that says “Without the shepherd, the sheep are not a flock.” And there is an old Romanian proverb that says “The lone sheep is in danger of the wolf.” They express the truth about our relationship to the Lord and our relationships with one another. We need God and we need other human beings. In John 10, Jesus declared that he was the “Good Shepherd” who lays down his life for the sheep. When asked to confirm whether or not he was the Messiah, Jesus repeated a summary of this discourse: “At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, ‘How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.’ Jesus answered, ‘I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. The Father and I are one.’” (John 10:22-30).

In calling Himself the Good Shepherd, Jesus refers not only to his earlier discourse, but also to the 23rd Psalm, in which David sings: “The Lord is my shepherd.” Jesus claims this psalm as a portrait of who he is. It is as if Jesus were saying “I am the LORD who is your shepherd”; “I am *that* good shepherd that David describes.” When speaking through David, God portrays himself as the shepherd and the people, or more specifically the individual, as his sheep. In John’s Gospel, the first chapter shows us that this Shepherd God becomes like his sheep in order to care for them. The first title or name that John the Baptist gives to Jesus when introducing him to the people is clear: “Behold, the Lamb of God” (John 1:29). Though the name obviously foreshadows the sacrificial mission of Jesus, it also states the simple fact that the Shepherd, the Messiah, became like the sheep. God became like us. One of the signs that points to who Jesus is, however, rests in the fact that the sheep will recognize their Shepherd. This sign, however, also reveals something extraordinary: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish” (John 10:27-28). Jesus has drawn a complete circle. As the eternal and divine Shepherd came down to become like one of us mortal sheep, now the sheep will ascend into the divine life of eternity as they follow their shepherd. Goodness and mercy will follow them all the days of their lives; they will dwell in the house of the Lord forever, just as Psalm 23 concludes. There are numerous parallels between John’s Gospel and the 23rd Psalm incidentally. When the Psalmist says: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures,” we see the Lamb of God of John 1 as well as the bread of heaven who feeds the people in John 6. When the Psalmist says, “He leads me beside still waters,” we might think of the living waters Jesus offers the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 or his leading of the disciples to safety across the lake in John 6. The shepherd who “leads me in paths of righteousness” is the One who teaches “right judgment” in John 7 and the truth setting us free in John 8. The shepherd who “restores my soul” is the same One who gives life back to Lazarus in John 11. And because of this Good Shepherd, we can walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death and fear no evil for Jesus is the resurrection and the life and whosoever believes shall not perish but have everlasting life, as we know from John 3 and John 11. In John 6, Jesus invites us to feast on him; he is speaking of the table prepared for us; John 12 and 13 speak of anointing with oil and water at memorable banquets. Our cups overflow, once again, because if we drink of his water we will never thirst again, as we read in John 4, and as we see at the cross, when water and blood pour forth in John 19. Goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives and we dwell in the house of the LORD forever because in the Father’s house there are many rooms, as it is written in John 14. The entire Gospel of John is the gospel of the Good Shepherd of Psalm 23, the Shepherd who became like his sheep, so that the sheep could become like the shepherd.

The Gospel of John also illustrates in very concrete terms what it means for the sheep to hear the voice of the shepherd and become like the shepherd. Jesus washed the feet of the disciples and told them to become servants. Three times Jesus told Peter, “Feed my sheep”, concluding his discourse with the simple exhortation: “Follow me” (John 21:15-19). Follow me also means *imitate me* or *be like me.* That means humbling ourselves the way Jesus humbled himself. A great part of experiencing God, of experiencing who God is and what God is like, is pouring ourselves out the way the Shepherd poured himself out into the sheep and lived among them, listened to them, and served them. It is in some ways not surprising that the Gospel of John was a favourite retreat topic of the late Jean Vanier, who passed away last week on May 7th (Ian Brown, “L’Arche founder Jean Vanier established the unique value of an intellectually disabled life”, *The Globe and Mail,* May 7th, 2019).

For if anyone can concretely explain to us the meaning of sheep hearing the shepherd’s voice, it is Jean Vanier. After leaving the Royal Navy, apparently Jean Vanier wandered about “lost” (Brown, ibid). And yet, it seems he was not that lost, for he worked with Auschwitz survivors after the Second World War and brushed up against other missions dedicated to those in need—prisons, the Benedict Labre house for homeless men in Montreal and also the Friendship House in Harlem (Ibid), which Thomas Merton had frequented before the war and his own journey to Gethsemane Abbey. I do not know why these things called to Jean Vanier, but I cannot help but think that he heard the voice of Jesus calling through the broken and the neglected. As it says in the parable in the Gospel of Matthew, when the King has separated out the sheep on the last day: “‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’” (Matthew 25:31-40). The sheep that belong to the shepherd are the sheep that care for other sheep; they are the sheep who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the strangers and visit the prisoners. It is lovely that we have institutions for that—but we have had various institutions for that for almost two thousand years. Jesus never meant this to be a mere matter of eradicating social ills—Jesus seemed to think that there will always be poor and broken people: “For the poor you always have with you” (John 12:8). It is about knowing the divine life. To become shepherds, we have to become sheep, and to become sheep, we have to graze with the other sheep—there is no other way to get to know the heart of Christ.

The sheep hear the voice by hearing the words of life that Jesus gives; but the sheep also hear the voice of the Shepherd by hearing what human life speaks in its gritty, street-level, unwashed, unpolished and broken glory. It is not about showing how caring we are, how just we are, now enlightened we are. In fact, I would argue that if we really wanted faith and enlightenment and perception of the ineffable or divine, personal or social revival, the fastest path is to just admit that we are not just, we are not enlightened, we are not even close to knowing what is divine and we have no good plans. That is basically what Jean Vanier did. With no formal training for caring for the disabled and nothing but a run down house with very basic running water and electricity, he started by just living with two mentally disabled men, Philippe Seul and Raphael Simi—both mute. As Vanier later recounted: “I had a little Citroën, one of those little two-seaters with a back bench. I thought we could drive around the countryside. And when we weren’t doing that, we could cook our food and eat.” And it turns out that this was all that was needed to begin. Consider this for a moment. It is tempting to end the sermon right here. Jean Vanier began his great career by living and listening to two people who could not speak. Later on, there was a man at a L’Arche community named Laurent, who had a profound effect on Ian Brown: “Very, very occasionally, he [Laurent] uttered a single word: *train*, the French word for train. He loved trains. Somehow, he seemed like one of the liveliest lights in the house. I doubt I will ever see him again, but the memory of him reminds me to find what is in my heart, at its simplest and most intense. Mr. Vanier created the possibility that Laurent could teach me something that important. The longer he lived with the intellectually disabled, the more Mr. Vanier understood their deep, though often hidden value” (Ibid). As Brown summarizes, “‘It is not just a question of performing good deeds for those who are excluded,’ Mr. Vanier wrote in *Becoming Human*, his biggest bestseller, based on his 1998 Massey Lectures, ‘but of being open and vulnerable to them in order to receive the life that they can offer; it is to become their friends. If we start to include the disadvantaged in our lives and enter into heartfelt relationships with them, they will change things in us. … They will then start to affect our human organizations, revealing new ways of being and walking together.’ In the long, bleak history of human disability, mankind’s most disenfranchised human beings suddenly had demonstrable value, Mr. Vanier declared. They taught him ‘to recognize and accept my own weaknesses and vulnerability. I no longer have to pretend I am strong and clever or better than others. I am like everybody else, with my fragility and my gifts.’ It made for a less aggressive posture toward the world – a posture that seems even more relevant today” (Ibid).

This is also, I believe, a recipe for friendship. Sheep need friends—other sheep—to be a flock. In the book that grew out of his doctoral thesis, *Made for Happiness: Discovering the Meaning of Life with Aristotle,* Jean Vanier wrote: “True love, that of authentic friends, is also a love that is active—a dynamic, enterprising love. Desiring what is good for another person does not mean simply being well disposed toward him and really open to him, but also being willing to expend oneself for and with him. Doing good together—that is what makes us fully friends. Love sees on a large scale and is inseparable from the experience of what is good. I want for my friend the greatest goods: not simply good health or success in business, but fullness of life. But then, what makes us fully alive? That which best nourishes the soul: the pursuit of truth culminating in contemplation” (Jean Vanier, *Made for Happiness: Discovering the Meaning of Life With Aristotle.* Tr. Kathryn Spink. A List. 2001. 69.

Earlier, I said that the 23rd Psalm is reflected in the Gospel of John. It is a summary and a prophecy of the Gospel. It speaks of the Good Shepherd—what he will do, what he does every day. It is also a road map for the sheep who would become shepherds—what we will do, what we could do every day. First, become sheep. Then feed the other sheep. Make other sheep rest in green pastures. Lead them to the still waters. Restore their souls. Prepare tables for the sheep in the presence of danger. And let our cups overflow. Jean Vanier demonstrated that you do not even have to have a clear picture of it to start. There is a strange art form called *quantum sheep*, devised by Valerie Laws: “A quantum sheep is simply a regular sheep that, under observation and with a poetic word written upon its back, can create random poems based on its movements and rest states. Multiple such sheep (15 in the original scenario), or a flock, are needed in order to contain enough words to form a poem and to introduce sufficient randomness” (*Wikipedia*). The end results are comparable to haiku. Most of the time, we sheep are not aware of what the Lord is writing on our lives, but if we all carry pieces of the word of God, those pieces reveal something of God’s love and glory when we flock together and rest in one another’s presence and sacred friendship.