

Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year B

April 21, 2024

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Acts of the Apostles 4:8-12 (There is no salvation through anyone else but Christ.)

Responsory: Psalm 118 (The stone rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone.)

Second Reading: 1 John 3:1-2 (We are God's children now.)

Gospel: John 10:11-18 (Jesus, the Good Shepherd.)

Each of the three readings today features a different metaphor to describe the relationship between God and his people. At first glance, they seem like radically different ways of understanding who God is for us, and who we are in the sight of God. But, upon closer examination, it seems that all three metaphors are pointing us in the same direction, toward total dependence on God and trust in God's loving care for us.

As Peter tries to explain his faith in Jesus to a skeptical crowd of Jewish elders, he turns to an image that they would have known well from their study of the Psalms – the stone rejected by the builders, which has become the cornerstone. Psalm 118, from which that image is taken, exhorts the faithful to “take refuge in the Lord,” not in princes or other people who possess worldly power. For the Lord can take what the world rejects and make it a source of strength and security. Peter suggests that Jesus is the perfect example of that principle. Though rejected by the religious *and* secular authorities, he was raised up by the power of God to become our Savior. Jesus has become the cornerstone of the Church and of the whole human race. As Peter says, “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.”

The cornerstone symbolizes a solid foundation, a sure footing on which to build. And so, referring to Christ as *our* cornerstone expresses our total dependence on him as our one and only source of salvation. As the Psalmist says, we must “take refuge” in him, not in anyone else. But, let's not forget that the cornerstone also supports the entire structure built upon it. It lends its strength to all the other stones that make up the rest of the building. And we, the People of God, are that building. We are the living stones that form the structure. All of us depend on Christ for our *individual* salvation, but we also depend on him to hold us together and give strength and durability to the entire community of faith. We are *one* Church, *one* people, with a common mission and a shared faith, united and sustained by Christ.

After that relatively impersonal metaphor of a building and its cornerstone, St. John goes to the opposite extreme, employing a very tender, intimate image: “See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called *the children of God*.” So, we're not just living stones, which God has set firmly in place, building upon the foundation of Christ, our Savior. God has also claimed us as his own beloved children. Moreover, John hints that we will one day be transformed into something far greater, which has not yet been revealed. One day we will “see God as he is” and come to be like him in ways that we cannot even imagine yet.

It's also important to note that in John's letter he describes us as *little children* – not adolescents, who are somewhat independent of their parents. We're more like toddlers, who

depend on their parents for everything. Hence, the message of this metaphor resonates with that of Jesus as our cornerstone. We depend completely on God, our Heavenly Father, and on Jesus, the Savior whom he sent into the world for our sake. When we take refuge in *Christ*, we also take refuge in the loving Father who gave him to us, the same Heavenly Father who offered up his only begotten Son to set us free.

In today's gospel, Jesus uses yet another metaphor, this one with a long history and deep biblical roots. He calls himself "the Good Shepherd." To Jesus' contemporaries, that image would have immediately conjured up all sorts of associations, because they would have known all the various ways that a shepherd takes care of his sheep. For example, a shepherd guides and protects his sheep, just as Jesus taught his followers how to live in accordance with God's will and avoid the pitfalls of sin. A shepherd also leads his sheep to green pastures, where they can find nourishment, just as Jesus fed his disciples with the Word of God, sharing his insights with them at great length. A good shepherd also cares for his lost and injured sheep by bringing them back home and binding up their wounds, just as Jesus did for so many repentant sinners, who found refuge and mercy in him.

Yet, the one aspect of shepherding that Jesus emphasizes the most is the shepherd's willingness to *sacrifice his life for the sheep*. That's what really sets him apart from a hired man, who works for a wage, not for love of the sheep. When danger or hardship comes, the hired man thinks of self-preservation first. He will abandon the sheep, placing his own interests above their welfare, but a true shepherd would never do such a thing. The sheep belong to him, and he sees himself as belonging to them. His care for them is very personal and loving. He would literally give his life for his sheep, and they seem to know that instinctively. That's why they follow the shepherd – not because they have made a reasoned judgment that it's in their best interest, but because they have come to *trust* the shepherd, and they sense his deep love for them. We Christians follow Jesus for the same reasons, do we not? We have come to trust him completely, and we know his love for us.

The images that we encounter in today's Scriptures offer us three distinct ways to visualize our relationship with God. We can think of ourselves and our fellow Christians as stones built into a structure that rests securely on the cornerstone of Christ. Since he has proved his love by dying for us, and further proved his faithfulness whenever we have called upon him for help, we can truly "take refuge" in him with absolute confidence. Or, we can think of ourselves as God's little children, who are not embarrassed to cry out to him in time of need, but who also look forward to knowing him in a whole *new* way, when we are transformed and made glorious in his sight. Or, alternatively, we can think of ourselves as the sheep of God's flock, tended by the most loving of all shepherds, Jesus Christ. With the Good Shepherd watching over us, willing to give his life for us, we can truly rest in peace and security. Whichever image appeals to us most, *all of them* lead us to the same conclusion. We can put our trust in the Lord and depend on him completely.