

**Easter 4 / April 21, 2024**

**John 10:17**

**“I lay down my life that I may take it up again.”**

**The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the Sheep and takes it up again**

For whom would you lay down your life and die? In Belfast during the troubles, someone threw a grenade into a busy train station. A soldier spontaneously leapt and covered it with his body, preventing many deaths. People speak about their willingness to lay down their lives for a family member or dearly loved friend. Women and men in protection services routinely put their lives on the line for others. In combat, soldiers will remain with their mortally wounded comrades under fire, so their comrades will not die alone. Some are taken prisoner as a consequence of their loyalty. Some sustain lethal injury themselves. It may be rare, but it is not unheard of for people to lay down their lives and die for others.

Jesus says something similar, yet different. He expresses His willingness to lay down His life for the sheep, but unlike anyone else, He has the power to take His life up again. He has the power not simply to extend life for those whom He loves. He has the power to give eternal life to those who believe in Him. We honour as the highest expression of human love, the willingness of some to join others in death and of others to give their lives so that others may live. We honour as the greatest expression of divine love, Jesus' willingness to join us in life as a human being and to take our place in death, as the sacrifice of atonement for our sins and for the sins of the whole world. There are occasions when people offer their lives for others deemed worthy of such a sacrifice. Christ Jesus demonstrated His love by dying for us in our unworthiness. Christ Jesus demonstrated the divine power of His love and its eternal benefit, by laying down His life for our sins and taking it up again that whoever believes in Him would have eternal life.

In our gospel Jesus compares good shepherds to hired hands. Although shepherds and hirelings have the same responsibilities, He doesn't refer to the hirelings as shepherds. He calls them hired hands. There is nothing wrong with being a hired hand, an employee. Many good shepherds in the bible were hired in the sense that they were shepherding someone else's sheep. Rachel the daughter of Laban, met her future husband Jacob, as she shepherded her father's sheep. She was a good shepherd. The difference between a shepherd and a hireling in Jesus' words, is the shepherd cares for the sheep out of love for the sheep. The hireling cares for them out of love for himself. The good shepherd has a sense of responsibility for the sheep, regardless of whether he or she is the owner. The Good Shepherd loves the sheep in His care.

We don't need sheep to be a shepherd. A person entrusted to care for others in any form is a shepherd. A person who is a shepherd has a personal attachment to those entrusted into her or his care, be they actual sheep or people to whom they have a responsibility as guardians. Good shepherds love those entrusted to their care. A hireling sees the sheep as a means to secure an end; an income, food and lodging. A good shepherd loves the sheep. Because a good shepherd loves the sheep, he or she will risk their lives to protect the sheep in their care. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He loves the sheep in His care. The Good Shepherd lay down His life in defense of the sheep against the most-deadly enemies; sin, the devil and death. He took His life up again that all who believe in Him would rise with Him and have eternal life.

King David was a shepherd to his father's sheep. He was a good shepherd, both because he respected his father as the owner of the sheep and because he cared about the sheep. The sheep were another man's property, but he watched them as if they were his own. They were sheep and not humans, but he had respect for their well being as creatures of the Great Shepherd and King of Israel. David was a good shepherd. He cared for his father's sheep and loved them as his own. Because he loved his father and the sheep, he took seriously the responsibility entrusted to him. He fought lions, bears and wolves in the defence of someone else's sheep. When King Saul asked about his qualifications to defend the sheep of Isarel against the giant Goliath, David presented his credentials as a shepherd. He said, "When there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb, I went after him and struck him and delivered it from its mouth." A good shepherd doesn't stand and watch or look away from the sheep in their plight. A good shepherd fights to rescue the sheep from the jaws of death. David was a good shepherd. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He rescues us from the jaws of sin, the devil and death by taking our place in death. He lay His life down for our sin and took it up for our eternal salvation.

If a hireling who had no personal attachment to the owner and who saw the sheep as nothing more than a commodity, noticed a few sheep were missing, he wouldn't take much concern, as long as most were safe. A hireling would count a ten percent loss as part of doing business. The wolf and the lion need to eat too! He wouldn't stand between the sheep and the predator. He certainly wouldn't wrestle the bear and rescue the lamb from the jaws of death. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd leaves the 99 in a safe place and seeks to save the lost sheep. There is no acceptable loss for the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd loves the sheep. He came to seek and to save the lost. He lay down His life for the sheep. He took it up again that we might live eternally in Him.

David went from shepherding his father's sheep to shepherding the Lord's sheep, Israel. The kings of Israel and Judah were to be the Lord's shepherds. Sadly, most of them were hirelings who looked out for their own interests. In ancient Israel, men fought to be kings for their own interests, glory and power. Power struggles usually ended with the death not only of the losing contender, but also of his entire family. This is true in the modern world too. After overthrowing the Czarist government in 1917, one of the first things the Bolshevik party did was to kill the entire family of Czar Nicholas II.

In the book of 2 Kings a man named Jehu seized royal power from the house of Ahab. One of the first things he did to strengthen his claim to the throne was destroy the family of Ahab. Ahab had seventy sons, potential challengers to the throne. They were cared for by guardians, shepherds if you will, the elders of Samaria. Jehu gave these shepherds an allegiance test. They could either remain loyal to the sons of Ahab or join his side. Defending the sons of Ahab meant certain death, for Jehu intended to kill them. Joining his side meant death for the sons of Ahab, but life for the guardians. Jesus said, "He who is a hireling and not a shepherd...sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees and the wolf snatches them..." They were hirelings who loved neither the former King Ahab or his sons, or the new king for that matter. They served King Ahab, now they would serve King Jehu. They chose death for the sons of Ahab.

Judgement came on the house of Ahab because of his sin and the sin of his family; rebelling against the Lord, worshipping and promoting the worship of false gods. Judgement came to Adam's house because of his sin. Because of his sin, death came into the world. Because of his sin, all people are conceived and born into a broken relationship with God, in bondage to sin and under the condemnation of death. The just judgement of sin is death. Jesus is a different shepherd and king. He came into the world to seek and to save the lost sheep conceived in sin and under the condemnation of death. He didn't come to save the good sheep. In relationship to God there are no good sheep, only self-willed rebellious sheep, hostile to God in attitude and action. Jesus gave Himself into death for the bad sheep. Out of divine love, Jesus took the just judgement of human sin upon Himself on the cross. He lay down his life for you, me and all people, to pay our debt of sin. He took His life up again so that through faith in Him, baptism into His dying and rising, we would receive forgiveness, have life in Him, in time and eternity.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He calls us to Himself through the gospel, saying, "Come to me and I will give you rest." He leads us to streams of living waters in the covenant of holy baptism, in which He daily and constantly washes away the dirt of our sin. He calls us to drink freely of the water of forgiveness in repentance and absolution. He calls us to drink deeply that He might fill us with His Holy Spirit to live with Him and each other in newness of life. He nourishes our faith and gives us a foretaste of the feast of eternal life in the holy supper of His body and blood, under the forms of bread and wine. Through word, water, bread and wine, He nourishes nurtures and sustains our faith, so that He may give us a share in His resurrection and lead us into His Father's house to live with him forever. The Good Shepherd lay down His life for our sins and took it up again for our salvation.

The Lord who has begun His good work within us bring it to completion in the day of Jesus Christ. In His Name. Amen.