

24. June 2022

Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus
"The Lord seeks His sheep"

Ezek 34: 11-16

"For the Lord Yahweh says this: Look, I myself shall take care of my flock and look after it. As a shepherd looks after his flock when he is with his scattered sheep, so shall I look after my sheep. I shall rescue them from wherever they have been scattered on the day of clouds and darkness. I shall bring them back from the peoples where they are; I shall gather them back from the countries and bring them back to their own land. I shall pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the inhabited parts of the country. I shall feed them in good pasturage; the highest mountains of Israel will be their grazing ground. There they will rest in good grazing grounds; they will browse in rich pastures on the mountains of Israel. I myself shall pasture my sheep, I myself shall give them rest -- declares the Lord Yahweh. I shall look for the lost one, bring back the stray, bandage the injured and make the sick strong. I shall watch over the fat and healthy. I shall be a true shepherd to them.

Since the Old Testament, God has wanted to make clear to men, through the most marvellous comparisons and works, how great His love for them is. But understanding this truth seems to be one of the most difficult things for us. This is why, again and again and in so many ways, God tries to show us his love, to invite us to live in it and to find our security in it. This is also the great invitation of today's Solemnity: to discover once again that the Heart of Jesus is on fire with love for us!

However, it is not that God is tired of insisting, and continues to do so only for 'therapeutic reasons'. Quite the contrary! It is part of his being to declare his love to us and to show it to us, for *"God is love"* (1Jn 4:8). Normally it should be the most natural thing for us and we should have the unshakeable conviction of His love, but unfortunately this is often not the case. We have probably still recognised too little of God's love, even though it is all around us all the time.

Today the Lord addresses his people with the most touching words, lowering himself to what they can understand from their human experience. The figure of the shepherd,

lovingly tending his flock and standing in the midst of his sheep, personifies protection and care. Every Israelite knows what it means to be a good shepherd.

In the Lord's words we already glimpse the promise of Jesus' coming. God no longer only sends messengers to call his people to conversion, as he did in the Old Covenant; but now he himself comes: *"I myself shall take care of my flock and look after it."*

We know that all these promises are fully fulfilled in Jesus. The work is not yet finished, but the Good Shepherd has already come and gathers around Himself the sheep from all nations. All those who listen to his voice and follow him find food in abundance. Just as God takes care of the needs of the body, so he nourishes our souls abundantly. He gives us his word, the sacraments, prayer and all that we need for our spiritual life.

Today's Solemnity reading shows us vividly God's love, and thanks to faith, we can recognise that what the prophet Ezekiel tells us is indeed a reality. Our right response to this love should be to love God more and more and to trust him fully, knowing that we are loved more and more by him. But since our life is not only about our relationship with God, but also with other people, the certainty of knowing that we are loved should increase our concern for all those sheep that the Lord continues to seek.

He makes us participants in his mission, so that even through us he goes out in search of those who are lost and scattered; of the lost and wandering, wounded and weakened sheep; and also of those who, though strong, need to be protected.

The concrete application of this mission in our lives will depend on the vocation and task that the Lord has given to each of us in particular, and the place where He has placed us.

If we consider that all humanity is called to be the family of God, then our calling to shepherd extends to all people. Of course, in practice, we can only assume this in our environment; however, on a spiritual level we can assume a pastoral service for all men, embracing them in our prayer and in a life of surrender to God. Through prayer we can go in search of all the lost sheep, entrusting them to the grace of God. In prayer we can intercede for those who are in darkness and do not yet know the light of Christ. In prayer we can go after those who are in danger of being lost and who wander through life without finding its meaning.

The love of the divine Shepherd can deeply mark our heart, making it more and more receptive and more concerned to seek and serve the poor, his sheep. In this way, our heart becomes like the Heart of Jesus.