

Jn 10:1-10; Acts 2:14a, 36-41; 1 Pet 2:20b-25 Closer to God

I am not afraid to die. Why? Because our loved ones, when they died, gave us a tremendous gift: They made the transition from the physical life into the spiritual life. And if they did it, we can do it too.

We may even look forward to it. St. Thomas Aquinas and the Catholic Church teaches that the earthly bonds of love and friendship, that prepare us for heaven...they actually endure with us in heaven. So, we will be together again...in heaven.

Jesus gave us the same gift, and so much more. He destroyed the power of death and made clear the path to life and immortality.

That's why we just prayed (opening prayer), may we, the humble flock, reach where the brave Shepherd has gone before and share in the joys of heaven!

Who is the brave Shepherd? God Himself. He said through the prophet Ezekiel:

I myself will pasture my sheep; I myself will give them rest (Ez 34:15)...The lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal...shepherding them rightly (Ez 34:16).

That promise was fulfilled in Jesus Christ who said, *I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (Jn 10:11)*. For, *I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly (Jn 10:10)*.

How will we share in the joys of heaven? We have to pass through the sheepgate. And the sheepgate is Jesus (Jn 10:7). Like He said, *I am the way he truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (Jn 14:6)*.

That means there is no Muslim gate, no Buddhist gate, no Hindu gate, and no New Age gate. Only Jesus is the gate into heaven.

And to pass through that gate, we have to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus (Mt 16:24). That means two things: we have to (1) choose for Jesus, and (2) persevere in Jesus.

How do we choose for Jesus? We saw it in the first reading. The people having crucified the Messiah, asked, *What are we to do?*(Acts 2:37).

St. Peter answered, *Repent and be baptized...in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins* (Acts 2:38). Three thousand did.

It means a complete change of heart. And its not just a one-time thing. St. Cyprian used to say we have to develop what we have already become by baptism and grow more and more into what God intended us to be.¹

We grow into what God intended when we repent and confess our sins. Because we grow in faith and love. We grow closer to God.

So come to confession. I'm sure you've seen the lines on Saturday filled with people from other churches. Don't let that stop you. Come to confession after the daily 7:30am mass or come to the office.

How do we persevere in Jesus? In the second reading, St. Peter says we must persevere in a life of love and doing good, even if we suffer for it...

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps (1 Pet 2:21).

For this we have been called. Our vocation is to share in the saving mission of Jesus Christ. To follow in His footsteps. And thereby to bring ourselves and others...closer to God.

Imagine following behind Jesus as He carries the cross. You see His footprints in the sand and you put your feet into those footprints.

How does that feel? It feels like you are supposed to become the good shepherd for others by imitating Jesus. So, let's try this:

God calls us to listen with a heart of compassion. When Jesus, completely exhausted, saw the vast crowds, his heart was moved with compassion. So he healed them, taught them, and fed the 5,000 (Mt 14:13-21).

¹ M. Reveillaud, *St. Cyprien: L'Oraison Dominicale*, Publications Universitaires de France, Paris: 1964).

God calls us to forgive like Jesus. When they brought Him the woman caught in adultery, no one without sin could cast the first stone. And Jesus said, *neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more* (Jn 8:11).

When we crucified Him on that cross Jesus said, *Father forgive them for they know not what they do* (Lk 23:34).

God calls us to protect the poor, the suffering and the oppressed. Like the Good Samaritan:

When a man was attacked and left for dead, others passed by. But a Samaritan stops, mends his wounds and makes sure he is assisted further at the inn (Lk 11:29-37).

That is our vocation. Our vocation is to serve. Like Jesus said: *the son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as ransom for many* (Mt 20:28).

For this we have been sent into this world. Like Jesus said, *I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me* (Jn 6:38). But how will we know the will of the one who sent us?

Jesus said, *My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me* (Jn 10:27). How do we hear His voice? It's called the discernment of spirits:

Ask yourself one simple question: Does it bring me closer to God, or does it take me away from God?

Let us pray, Lord Jesus, Our Good Shepherd, strengthen us to grow in faith and love so that we may hear your voice and follow You. And may we may share in Your saving mission by bringing our brothers and sisters closer to God.

Today is World Day of Prayer for Vocations and Pope Benedict used to say there are three things a family can do to encourage vocations:

1. Pray. Jesus said, *[Pray to] the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest* (Mt 9:38).
2. Witness. Show young people your commitment to Christ in your willingness to serve the Church.
3. Listen. There really isn't a crisis in vocations. The crisis is in "hearing" the call and responding to it. Because it can be drowned out by other voices. So why not say to a young man, "I think you'd make a good priest," or "I'm praying for you that you might have a vocation to be a priest."

And so, let us stand and recite together the Serran Prayer for Vocations:

O God, who wills not the death of a sinner, but rather that he be converted and live, grant we beseech You, through the intercession of Blessed Mary, ever Virgin, Saint Joseph, her spouse, Saint Junipero Serra, and all the saints, an increase of laborers for your Church, fellow laborers with Christ, to spend and consume themselves for souls, through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, Our Lord, who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, forever and ever, amen.