

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fourth Sunday of Easter  
May 7, 2017

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Saint John's Gospel is unique among the four Gospels. This evangelist did not record any of our Lord's parables. Instead, the Fourth Gospel gives us allegories. And there is a reason for this. Parables are concerned with the fundamental teachings of Christianity. And by the time St John wrote his Gospel account the Church was already familiar with fundamental Church teaching. The allegories express the central theme of John's purpose. Christ is the Exalted Lord in life and death and resurrection, *yet at the same time* also the personal Saviour in close relationship to every individual member of His Divine Society. Jesus is the Risen Lord exalted to the Right Hand of the Father and still the caring special friend of each of His followers. The Risen Lord's conduct after His resurrection reminded St John of those things the Master had once said about being the Shepherd of the sheep.

In the allegory of the Good Shepherd the Lord employed dual imagery to show His dual role. He is the *gate* that leads to the sheepfold *and* He is the *shepherd* who enters the sheepfold, prods the sheep, and leads them out to green pastures. Jesus is both: gate and shepherd.

A gateway gives access two ways. You can go in and out. So when Jesus said, "I am the door of the sheep" He was telling us He is the way that God comes to mankind *and* the way we get to God. Anyone who wishes to have access to souls for good purposes must approach them through Christ. And anyone who sets out to lead humanity to God must also do it through Christ. And the Lord warns that those intending bad purposes have to avoid Christ and climb in some other way. Jesus has a name for them: thieves and robbers and wolves in sheep's clothing.

The Son of God served notice that this arrangement is holy law. It is one of the basic principles of how things work in the Divinely-created universe. It applies not just to the Church but to events in the pre-Christian era and in the non-Christian world today. Whatever belongs to truth is of Christ. The Lord has the corner on the market! Any teacher or promoter of truth is a teacher of Christianity in its universal and fundamental sense of Jesus as the gate. But Divine Revelation does not end with the universal. It culminates in the personal Resurrection from the dead of

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God's Own Incarnate Son. Divine revelation teaches that truth ultimately is not a thing or force or ideal but a *Person* Who loves us and is to be loved.

It is this aspect of the allegory of the Good Shepherd which is perfect for the Easter Season. Christ's Death and Resurrection (and Ascension into Heaven) is the occasion of His Spirit's release into all the world to inspire and prompt and urge all souls towards truth and beauty in all things. The Lord declares He is not only the gate through which God comes to mankind and through which all mankind aspires to God, but also He Himself is the Good Shepherd *Who goes before us* through the gate.

We have wonderful hymns about Christ as leader. But before He leads us, Scripture says "He **putteth forth** His own sheep." "Putteth forth" is the same word used to describe the Holy Spirit "driving" Our Lord into the wilderness after His Baptism. The word implies gentle force, the kind of force a shepherd would use to rouse his flock from its bed in the fold so that he might lead it in the right way to those green pastures.

The allegory reminds us the first disciples of Christ experienced Him in the *reverse way* from most of us ever since. In the Galilean ministry they had come to know Jesus as their personal leader and shepherd. After the Resurrection they began to grasp the universal significance of Who He is and what He accomplished in His victory over sin and death. For most of us the process is in reverse order. When we are seeking ultimate meaning and ultimate answers, we are looking for the gate. And for a while, through honest and careful intellectual process, we may not even be aware of the gate itself. But then something strange and numinous begins to happen. Something begins to facilitate our passage to the Truth. We become aware that the "something" is *Someone*. In that moment we know we are in a gateway and that this gateway has become the Shepherd and that we are being fed and led.

Those first disciples of the Lord, in discovering the meaning of Easter, grew from the personal to the universal in terms of their realization of Who and what Jesus is. Today, we more often journey seeking the universal and arriving at the personal.

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Saint John reminds us it is important that we know Christ both ways: as the two-way gate between God and man, and as the Shepherd Who leads us on our way.