

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 22, 2018

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Saint John's Gospel is unique among the four Gospels. This evangelist has not recorded the Lord's parables. Instead, the Fourth Gospel gives us three allegories. And there is a reason for this. Parables are short and to the point. They focus on one example. They put forth the fundamental teachings of Christ. He says "The Kingdom of Heaven is like this." By the time St John wrote the Fourth Gospel the Church was already familiar with the parables, and preachers were proclaiming those fundamental teachings. The allegories, however, express the central purpose of John's Gospel: that Christ the Exalted Lord is revealed in His life, death, and resurrection, and *yet at the same time* remains the personal Saviour in close relationship to every individual member of the Divine Society.

After the Resurrection, the Risen Lord cared so patiently and gently for Peter and John, Mary Magdalene, the apostles in the Upper Room, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and to St Thomas. Christ is exalted at the Right Hand of the Father, but He is still the caring friend of each of His followers. And this care reminded St John many years later of things the Master had once said about being the Good Shepherd of the sheep.

In the allegory of the Good Shepherd Jesus employed dual imagery to show His dual role. Jesus 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.

A gateway gives access two ways. You can go in and out. When the Lord said, "I am the door of the sheep," He was telling us He is the way God comes to mankind *and* the way we get to God. Anyone who wishes to have access to souls for good purposes is approaching them through Christ. This is true whether realized or not. Anyone who sets out to lead humanity to God must do it through Christ. As the Lord says in another place: "No one comes to the Father except through Me." And those who have bad purposes in mind are described by the Lord as thieves and robbers who climb into the sheepfold some other way.

The Lord serves notice that this is eternal law. It is part of the basic foundation of how things work in the universe God has created. It applies not just to Church business but also to all events in the pre-Christian and non-Christian world. Like it

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or not, whatever belongs to truth is of Christ. Any teacher or promoter of truth is a teacher of Christianity in its universal and fundamental sense.

The exciting part is that Divine Revelation does not end with the universal but with the *personal*. At Judgement Day we are confronted by God's Own Son resurrected from the dead. Divine Revelation teaches that truth ultimately is not a thing or force or ideal but a Person Who is to be loved. Christ's Death and Resurrection and His Ascension into Heaven are the launch pad for His Holy Spirit's release into all the world. It is the Holy Spirit Who inspires and prompts and urges all souls towards truth and beauty in flourish in harmony in the ordered creation God had made.

In the allegory of the Good Shepherd Our Lord tells us He is not only the gate through which God comes to mankind, and men and women aspire to God. He Himself is *also* the Good Shepherd Who goes before us through the gate. It is important to remember the first followers of Jesus experienced Him in the *reverse way* from most of the rest of us. In the Galilean ministry they had come to know Jesus as their personal leader and shepherd, their *rabbi*. *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 the other way round. We first learn of Christ through the teaching of His Church. Then in personal discovery we come to know Him as shepherd. In the allegory, looking for ultimate meaning and final answers is "looking for the gate". When we look for the gate something strange and numinous begins to happen, and for a while we try to pass it off, explain it away, and may even be embarrassed by it. We become aware something is facilitating our search for truth, and the "something" is *Someone*. We come to know we are in a gateway and this gateway has become the Shepherd, and *we are being led*.

When the first disciples experienced the resurrection they grew from the personal to the universal in terms of Who and what Jesus is. We more often grow from seeking the universal and arriving at the personal. But it is important we know Christ both ways, as the two-way gate between God and man, and as the shepherd Who leads us on our way to the heavenly realm.