

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
April 25, 2021

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Although Saint John's Gospel contains some of the parables of the Lord, it is famous for three allegories. There is a reason for this. The *parables* of Christ focus on the fundamental teachings of Christianity. Parables are short and to the point. They usually make the point clear. *Allegories* are extended metaphors, sometimes even to the length of a novel. In allegories the meaning is layered and not always obvious at first reading. By the time St John wrote the Fourth Gospel, the Church was already familiar with fundamental Church teaching. But allegories express the central theme of John's gospel: that Christ the Exalted Lord in life and death and resurrection is also, *at the same time*, the personal Saviour in close relationship to every individual member of the Divine Society.

The Easter Season Mass gospels give us evidence of this care: the way the Risen Lord reached out to Peter and John, Mary Magdalene, to all the apostles in the Upper Room, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and coming back for Thomas one week later. Jesus is the Risen Lord, but He is still the caring friend of each of His followers. And this pastoral care reminded St John, writing many years later, of things the Master had once said about being the Shepherd of the sheep.

The Allegory of the Good Shepherd was actually preceded by the Parable of the Gate, which did not make the connections the Lord intended. So the parable was amplified by the allegory which followed. A gate is impersonal, so the Lord used dual imagery to show His dual role. Jesus is *both* the gate that leads to the sheepfold *and* the shepherd who enters the sheepfold, prods the sheep, and leads them out to green pastures.

Today's gospel puts the focus on the Good Shepherd, but the Lord tried the image of Himself as gatekeeper first. A gateway gives access two ways. You can go in and go 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*, to lead humanity to God, must approach them through Christ. This is true whether the instructors recognize the gate or not. Those intent *on bad purposes* avoid the gate altogether and climb into the sheepfold some other way; these are likened to thieves and robbers.

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It is important to remember His first followers came to Jesus in *reverse* of the way most of us experience in our own faith journey. The first disciples came to know Jesus in His Galilean ministry as their teacher and leader. It was after His 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. Looking for meaning to life and final answers, we look for a gateway. And then something strange and numinous begins to happen (which we initially try to pass off or explain away.) But we become aware that something is facilitating our passage to truth and that the “something” is *Someone*. We come to know we are in a gate that is the Good Shepherd *and we are being led*.

The Good Shepherd is not just the one who faithfully does his job! The Greek word for that is **ἀγαθός**, the moral rectitude of goodness. St John does not use that word for good. Instead, Jesus is the **καλός**, *the attractive one*. We certainly saw the “beauty of holiness” (*Psalm 96:9*) Incarnate in the Risen Lord’s approach to His disciples on Easter Day, customizing His treatment to fit the various personalities and temperaments of His followers. That is a reminder your vocation and mine is to cultivate and practice the Christian virtues in such a way as to win souls to Jesus Christ. We know it is possible to be morally upright in a repulsive way. The Lord is the way. He is the template, model, and measure of our vocations. Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd. In Him the beauty of goodness is revealed, supremely so in His passion, death, and resurrection.