

To Know and Be Known

From the Gospel

*St. John 10:11 [Jesus said] I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. 12 But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. 13 The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep. 14 **I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine.** 15 **As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father:** and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.*

The word *know*, like the word *love*, has many degrees of application. We love our friends and family, but we also love fishing, or watching football, or ice cream. “Do you know her?” can mean many things. Are you merely acquainted with her, or are you thoroughly familiar with her? We can safely hide within the great range of uses for which such words can be applied. When these terms are carelessly tossed off in the casual manner in which they are generally used, one can tell very little about the degree of love or knowledge involved.

But their use within the Bible allows no such latitude. Think of this well known and very difficult saying of Christ:

Mt. 7:21 Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. 22 Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? 23 And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

I never knew you. How is such a statement to be interpreted? “I never had a relationship with you of any kind.” It is a complete denial of personal knowledge. It reminds us of Peter’s thrice repeated words during the trial of Jesus, uttered under very different circumstances. To those who recognized his Galilean accent, he declared, *I know not what thou sayest... I do not know the man... I know not the man* (From Mt. 26) Peter was disowning Christ to save himself, denying knowledge of the One who had known him far more deeply than any one ever could or would.

In today's Gospel, Jesus uses the figure of a shepherd who is on terms of dearest familiarity with his flock. Earlier in this chapter He had described this intimacy:

4 And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. 5 And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers.

So intertwined are the lives of the shepherd and his sheep that there is a sensory connection on every level. They recognize him through sight and sound. These are his badges of entry into the fold, his security pass into the very hearts and beings of these valuable animals which are utterly dependent upon Him. *To him the porter openeth...* (10:3). It is a relationship that is perfectly fruitful for both parties. Both receive what they require on the deepest level: they, the shepherd's care and oversight, and he, the privilege and joy of responsibility.

Our text picks up this theme again: *I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine. As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep.* The superstructure of the whole relationship is based upon knowledge, knowledge of the sheep by the shepherd, and knowledge of the shepherd by the sheep. Furthermore, this lovely earthly picture is a mirror of the one enjoyed between God the Father and His Son. It, too, is based upon relationship.

The picture Jesus paints for us in this chapter provides a pleasant pastoral interlude between scriptural passages fraught with tension as the Jewish leaders continue closing in upon Christ. But His sayings about the Good Shepherd are intended directly for them. *Verily I say unto you...* are the first words of this section. Their claims to exclusive knowledge of God kept them safely ensconced in their widely respected positions of learning and control of religious life. It was this assumed knowledge, which was no knowledge at all, that Jesus was addressing.

And so my question for us today is, what does it mean to *know* Christ and to be *known* by Him? “Knowing the Lord” is a phrase tossed around in certain circles with great ease. We treat it with that same sense of informality and excessive ease which characterize too many human relationships. I would suggest that true knowledge of God commences with introduction to Him. It would be the same between you and me, an initial point of entry into what we hope will be an enduring and mutually beneficial friendship and bond. For some of us, this has been through a prayer of acceptance of Christ followed by adult baptism. For others, it has been the realization over a lifetime of the implications of childhood baptism. It is marked by ever-expanding familiarity which is the consequence of shared experience in a variety of settings. This sounds very human, really, but the same dynamic operates between us, the sheep, and Him, the Good Shepherd. There will be *green pastures* and *still waters*, but there will also be storms and tempests. Worse yet, there will be the treachery of abandonment by the hireling, or invasion by *thieves* and *robbers*, or attacks by *wolves*, all spoken of elsewhere in St. John 10. Knowing the Shepherd, then, means basking in the warmth and comfort of His personal presence, but also absolute dependence upon His protection and guidance for the sake of very spiritual survival.

Anything less cannot possibly fulfill the meaning of knowing the Lord in the manner in which Scripture intends. We are good at insulating our lives from such extremes. Never before have we been given such apparent control over what immediately affects us. It's as if the Shepherd and His constant provision have been supplanted by artificial means. We have left Him unemployed. We have arrived in the peculiar position of having to fight our way through a mountain of conveniences to rejoin the Shepherd in a simple relationship of love and trust.

I am suggesting that for us, this matter of knowing Christ and maintaining an active relationship with Him will depend to a large part upon our sheer determination to do so. If we were

in other lands, or other ages, mere circumstance would obligate the intimacy. Far less would intervene between Sheep and Shepherd, complicating the relationship, ruining the communication, upsetting the dynamic of absolute dependency upon Him. Hungry, needy animals have no problems recognizing what is most important. They rush to the sheep gate when their Protector returns, fully expecting their necessary nourishment, and drawing as near to him as space will allow to feel the protective security of his presence. They have no life other than that which he provides. They want nothing outside of the scope of that which he determines. They have no interest in anything they can provide for themselves, for none is available. And if it were, they would shun it as something compromising that relationship which they most cherished. Their reward is that one thing which they desire above all others, the knowledge of the one they have come to love, and the assurance that he knows and loves them in return.

Do you see how daunting is our task? What else matters? These things are not merely handed to us. They are expected of us, if we are truly to be counted among those who can claim they know Him, and whom He also will openly claim He knows.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.