

The Church

One of the last things Jesus says to Peter is, 'Feed my lambs - Take care of my sheep - Feed my sheep.' John 21:15-17

The role of shepherd is here laid on the apostle Peter, the rock on which the Lord would build his Church.

When Simon Peter recognized that Jesus was 'the Christ, the Son of the living God', Jesus said, 'I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.' Matthew 16:16-18

Reflect on the different nature of these two images relating to Peter - 'rock' as the foundation of the church and 'shepherd' as leader. What do they mean for the Church today?

Leaders in the Church are called 'pastors', directly from the Latin for 'shepherd' and bishops carry a symbolic crook.

Teaching focus

Arcana Caelestia 294

People are called 'sheep' who are endowed with the good that stems from charity, that is, with spiritual and natural good. And this is why the Lord is called the Shepherd of the sheep, and why people who are endowed with charity are termed 'sheep'.

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'A shepherd' or one who feeds the flock is one who leads and teaches. It is the affection for interior truth that teaches, for it is by virtue of that affection that the Church is the Church and a shepherd or pastor is a pastor. The reason 'a shepherd' and one who feeds the flock means in the Word those who lead and teach is that 'the flock' means those who are led and taught, and therefore means Churches ... The fact that shepherd or pastor and flock have these meanings is very well known in the Christian world, for these are the terms used for those who teach and those who learn.

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Five Essentials - Aspects of Loving - a focus for the Church
2nd Essential: Part 3: Relating to Love - the Shepherd of his Sheep
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Relating to Love - the Shepherd of his Sheep



**The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters.
Psalm 23:1-2**

**He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young. Isaiah 40:11**

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me." John 10:14

'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want' are words that penetrate our soul, that feed our need, that lift our burdens, that take away any care.

'He makes me lie down in green pastures.' He gives me refreshing food and rest. How we long for rest but don't allow ourselves to, being taken up with all the things we 'have to do'. What pressure we put ourselves under! The Lord takes away all this weight we place upon ourselves and 'makes' us lie down. What a relief!

The *'quiet waters'* still our racing minds and gently lead them to the Lord's presence within, a state of calm and peace.

With him we need have no fear, for our Shepherd will protect us from all harm, warding off any threat to our person with his *'rod'* or club. He will help us out of a tight spot and keep us on the right track with his *'staff'* or crook. We can feel safe in his hands. His love provides more than we need - *'My cup overflows'*. We are filled with good things, more than we can take in.

He brings us home, wanting nothing, for we are loved beyond anything we can imagine.

'Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.'

Pause

Read the whole psalm several times gradually letting the words sink in, letting the Lord's love and care for you soak into your very being. You might find yourself drawn to certain words or a phrase. Stay with these. Let them speak to you for as long as they hold you. Listen to what your shepherd is saying to you.

Possibly no other part of the Bible fills our soul and comforts us like Psalm 23. It has everything to lift us from wherever we are to where we most want to be - loved and cared for, fed and protected, guided and sheltered. All this is possible, is there, is available and happening 24/7 because it is the Lord who provides it. No ordinary, fallible mortal but the Lord. And yet he is described as a shepherd, a recognisable, common figure in Bible times though rare today. Still we can relate to the loving care a shepherd has for his sheep. We can truly say *'The Lord is my Shepherd.'*

From relating to Love as 'the ground of our being' invisibly inherent in our lives, and as 'the Secret Sower' working in hidden ways within us, we can here relate to love expressed personally. We can imagine the Lord as our Shepherd and we readily take on the role of sheep.

Sheep

We easily identify with sheep going astray and getting lost, with doing what others do and mindlessly following them. The Bible often describes the wayward Israelites as 'like sheep without a shepherd'. The uncertainty at such times, the unrest, the desperate search to satisfy our needs brought on by our wilfulness and thinking we know and can find what we want, makes the Shepherd's approach such a welcome sight, when we find ourselves in trouble. How we long to be rescued! That is the Lord's mission.



'I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak.'
Ezekiel 34:16

Everyone is valued. The Lord's love desires to save all.

Read the parable of the lost sheep, Luke 15:3-7. Read it again imagining you are the sheep and take in the joy when the sheep is brought back safely.



Bible focus

The image of the shepherd might be the most prevalent throughout the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Adam and Eve's second son, Abel, *'kept flocks'* Genesis 4:2. Abram and his family were nomadic shepherds. David grew up as a shepherd boy and became the Shepherd King providing the imagery of both King and Shepherd for our Lord centuries later when he came on earth. In John 10:14-15 Jesus proclaims,

'I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me - just as the Father knows me and I know the Father - and I lay down my life for the sheep.'

The shepherd knows and is known. His love cannot be surpassed. It is a total giving of himself for the sake of his sheep. That is what love is. In the face of any danger whatsoever it is there. Nothing can overwhelm love. Love conquers all.

At the end of the Bible we are reminded of Jesus' total giving of himself for our sake and his continuing care for us with the image of the Lamb on the throne: *'For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd.'* Revelation 7:17

Read John 10:1-16 and note the loving care of the shepherd compared with the self-interested ways of the thief and hired hand.