

Easter Four

April 13, 2008

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in thy eyes, O Lord my strength and my redeemer. Amen

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that you may have life and have it abundantly.

At St. Mark's Church in San Antonio, we would send our youth group on annual summer mission trips.

Although I didn't travel on any of these trips, I enjoyed hearing about their adventures when the kids returned.

My favorite story came from a mission trip to Navaho land when a Native American storyteller at the VBS the kids ran told the following story.

There was once a wise man respected by the tribe for his great age and wisdom.

His grandson came to him to ask why there was so much conflict and discord in the world.

The elder thought for a moment and then replied, "My child, there are two dogs battling within my heart.

One is full of anger, hatred and rage. The other is full of love, forgiveness and peace.

The old man paused and he and his grandson sat for a moment in silence.

Finally the boy spoke, Grandfather, which dog will win the battle in your heart? The one filled with hatred or the one filled with love?

The old man looked at his grandson and replied. "The one I feed will win."

From Iraq to San Francisco, our world is still untamed and full of conflict.

We see it all around us.

Even something like the Olympic torch that is supposed to highlight world unity has become a flashpoint as people take to the streets to demonstrate either for or against China.

And the newspaper headlines continue to remind us that the world is a dangerous place, whether we live in the southeast or the Middle east.

Yet the true conflicts we experience are not on our streets or in our neighborhoods, much less in lands far away.

The conflict is always fought out in the human heart.

The tribal elder in my story was right. Too many of us in the world today feed the dogs of hatred and anger.

In his own day, Jesus knew this fact well.

His world was little different from ours.

Our Lord came of age in an occupied land with a foreign military force, and various religious/political groups competing for control of Jerusalem and the Jewish Temple.

Jesus knew all about the intense hatred that folks of his day felt for the Romans, or the Samaritans

And many of these same conflicts in Jesus' own land are still with us today.

The human heart does not change so quickly or easily.

The world still has its share of thieves and bandits ready to snatch and scatter the flock, as Jesus makes clear in the today's Gospel account.

We like to think though, that today we are in control, that no one can hurt us and that no problem is so intractable that we cannot solve it.

But history has a way of shattering those types of illusions.

We are not secure even in our own little worlds. We really don't have our acts together.

Too much of human life is controlled by our own false gods, of money, power and sex.

We remain today vulnerable to our own sinfulness as we do to the dangers posed by terrorists.

In the midst of this madness, all of us have come to this church and this place in desperate need for love and compassion.

And as Episcopalians who love order and ritual, we must admit that the human condition remains as messy and chaotic as a flock of sheep without a shepherd.

Thieves and bandits lie in wait at every bend, ready to snatch heart and soul.

Of course, if we had been writing the Gospels, we probably wouldn't have chosen, dirty, bleating and vulnerable sheep as the appropriate image for ourselves as Christians in this sleek post-modern world of Ipods and computers.

Aren't we are so much more sophisticated then a bunch of sheep?

Aren't we more advanced, more intelligent than simple animals?

We might try and say that this to ourselves, but we forget that we are all (sheep and human alike) part of God's creation and we have shared this planet for many years.

And as part of God's creation like it or not, we perhaps have more in common than we like to admit.

Like the flocks they tended, the shepherds of Jesus' day were often dirty and wooly, enduring sun and rain for days and weeks on end.

But unlike their charges, they were vigilant and uncomplaining, watching for danger and trouble, providing pasture and allaying thirst.

The shepherd knew his flock as no one else. And the sheep followed him because they know his voice.

Jesus speaks of himself as the gate of the sheep.

Some scholars contend that shepherds of the period would place their own bodies across the small of the sheep enclosure during times of peril, risking their lives for the sake of their flock.

Perhaps it is this image of the shepherd as human gate, that Jesus has in mind with this metaphor, his own presence stretched out and bridging our own insecurities.

Whoever, enters by me, he assures us, will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture.

It is all too easy for us to go our way, to listen to the voices that tell us to feed the other dog that dwells inside our heart.

For that will be the time that we will be most tempted to join the thieves and bandits of this world, and to indulge in our destructive instincts that feed that other dog.

And just because our own crimes might not rival those of other war criminals we should never lose that sense that beneath our own woolly exterior a war for our souls still rages.

C. S. Lewis used to say that folks were mistaken who thought his collection of letters from a senior to a junior devil, the screwtape letters were the result of many years study in the fields of moral theology.

He said it was an underserved compliment because the most reliable method he had found for learning how temptation worked was to examine carefully his own heart. That was what truly showed him the way of the ungodly.

In closing, let me return one more time to my earlier story. There is a postscript to the story that the storyteller added.

When the boy asked his grandfather which one of the dogs will win. The one I feed will win replied the elder, but then he continued.....My child feeding one dog or the other is only part of the answer.

The Great Spirit feeds each of us. It is from the Great Spirit that we first learned to feed others at all.

This Easter season we are all fed by the Great Spirit of love and forgiveness.

We have come to the Paschal banquet ready to keep the feast, eager to partake of the Lord's abundance and be nourished for the journey ahead.

But the world is still a place of famine and danger.

The human heart still yearns for the voice of the shepherd who brings peace and God's reconciling love.

As we have been fed by the one true shepherd, we are now called to feed others in Christ's name. That is the only way that other dog will ever win. Amen