

Every religion in the world, and there are many... everyone of them drives their people from behind. Only the Christian Faith, only Jesus leads His people, His sheep, by going before them. All worldly religions drive their people forward, from behind, using laws, rules, and threats. Jesus, however, leads His sheep with the voice of the Gospel.

You are not a Christian, a follower of Jesus, because the Ten Commandments of God drove you into following Him. You are not here today, I hope, because you were threatened with punishments if you did not come. No one becomes a Christian by being forced into following Jesus. That is how worldly religions operate. That is not the way of your Good Shepherd.

And this means, therefore, that Jesus will lose many people to the religions of the world. But not His sheep. People will come and go. But Jesus' sheep will follow Him, and not the strangers calling to them out of every other religion.

By nature we believe, everyone believes, that we must do something to reach eternal life; that a place in heaven is gained through our obedience. And this is what all worldly religions teach in one way or another. No wonder they attract so many people.

Why haven't they attracted you? Why haven't you gone after the voice of strangers? Perhaps there is something about you, even something in you that makes you immune to all the strangers calling out of all the religions of the world?

Not a chance! In fact, if we look to ourselves, to something, anything, in us to understand why we follow Jesus and not a stranger out there, we are closing our ears to the voice of Jesus and listening to the voice of a stranger – the stranger that is within us. Stranger in the Greek can mean *enemy*. And the greatest enemy we have is not the devil, not even the sinful world in which we live. Our greatest enemy is us, our own sinful flesh and perverted mind. And so, when we listen to ourselves, we are tuning out the voice of our Good Shepherd. No sheep can lead himself through life. Sheep must be led by someone else. And that someone else, for you, is Jesus.

Why do you follow Him? Because you are His sheep. What makes you His sheep? He has called you by name. He called to you in your baptism. There He called your name, and there He placed His own name upon you.

It seems very precarious, this relationship, if we can call it that, Jesus has with His sheep. He does not use force to lead His sheep. He does not handcuff His sheep to Himself. He does not bark out commands to drive His sheep in the way they should go. He does use His voice, but gently, calmly. He calls to His sheep. And when He calls, they follow.

It seems like it would be very easy for a sheep to wander off and become lost. And most certainly, sheep do wander away from Jesus. Did you hear St. Peter in our Epistle reading earlier? "*You were straying like sheep,*" he says. Dogs bark, cats meow, and sheep stray. It's what they do. Don't tell me that you have never strayed. I know better. I have been a straying sheep and so have you.

And there is nothing worse than being separated from Jesus. Nothing worse than wandering away from Him. Sins can be forgiven, and they are; even the worst of sins. But to wander away from Jesus, and to stop hearing His voice, which is the word of forgiveness, that is far worse than falling even into the most awful sin.

Thank God, therefore, that you are not just a sheep. Nor just a lost and wandering sheep. You, my friend, are Jesus' sheep. And so, Jesus calls to you. He calls you back to Himself in love. And when you return, He does not bark at you in rebuke for wandering away from Him. He speaks tenderly to you the word of forgiveness. Yes, He forgives you for straying. For all your sins He forgives you. And also for wandering away from Him.

He is not at all like the strangers out there, the strangers in those religions that beat their people who stray. They do not love their people. But Jesus loves His sheep. He died for His sheep. "*I lay down My life for the sheep,*" He says. No stranger would do that for you.

This is why Jesus goes out before His sheep. He went ahead of the sheep to the cross that the sheep deserve, that you and I deserve for our sins. But your Good Shepherd went there ahead of you, taking your place there. He went before you to suffer the penalty of hell on that cross. And so, He now is able to give you eternal life in heaven with Him. This, He says, is why He came. "*I came that they (My sheep) may have life and have it abundantly.*"

I hope you realize that there is nothing better than being Jesus' sheep. Nothing better. And so, I want to give you assurance. Never, ever doubt whether you truly are His sheep. Okay, so you haven't listened all that well to your Good Shepherd. And you have strayed from Him more times than you can even count. And this, you have fallen into sin, even terrible sin. But still, you are Jesus' sheep. Your baptism does not lie. And your baptism is proof positive that you belong to Jesus as one of His precious lambs.

Sheep stray. Sheep sin. But Jesus forgives. And Jesus always calls back to Himself His dear sheep. He is no stranger. He is your Good Shepherd. Amen.