

Belonging to God and the one flock of humanity – Homily for Easter IV

Acts 4.5–12

1 John 3.16–24

John 10.11–18

Let me start by welcoming Joseph and Alice, their parents, godparents, family and friends. Joseph and Alice came to our Little Fishes playgroup before the pandemic. They know this space as one where children can run free in play and wonder, adventure and joy. And it is with great joy that they will be baptised here today.

The hopefulness of these words might sound out of place amid the current crisis. But the celebration at the heart of baptism is all the more important in difficult times. To delight in who Joseph and Alice are at their baptism is a defiant, hope-filled act that, without denying tragedy, declares joy and play, wonder and adventure to be fundamental.

In our Gospel today, Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. This draws on ancient biblical imagery that speaks to the core of baptism. God cares for his people as a shepherd is devoted to his flock. Just as the good shepherd searches out the lost sheep and brings it home, so God seeks out each person. We often see this depicted in images or statues of Jesus carrying a lamb on his shoulders. Just like the one behind you, in fact,

above the main doors of the church. In the same way, the Good Shepherd stands at the entrance to the life of faith in baptism. In the waters of baptism, we are brought back home, bathed, refreshed, and enfolded in the love of God.

This relates to another aspect of the Good Shepherd. Shepherd and sheep belong to each other. The shepherd knows and cares for his flock and the flock know and trust the shepherd's voice. As Jesus says, 'I know my own and my own know me.' Strikingly, he also says this is what the inner life of God is like. Father and Son know and belong to each other. In baptism, we are baptised in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are brought into the divine life of mutual belonging. We belong to God and God belongs to us. This does not mean we or God are things to be possessed or used. Rather belonging here means being truly known, loved, and celebrated in the freedom and truth of who we uniquely are.

We see this sense of belonging shared between parents and children. Joseph and Alice are not their parents' property. They are gifts of God. Yet they also belong to their parents. In fact, they all belong to each other in the way they love and know each other in their life together. As Joseph and Alice grow up, they and their parents will explore how to live out this belonging with ever greater freedom and shared responsibility and discover fresh ways to celebrate each other's unmistakable mystery.

This is also true of the life of the Church. Through baptism, we belong to each other. We owe each other a duty of care and respect that grows from being open to and knowing each other in a shared existence. Baptism is not just something that happened in the distant past. It is an ever-present way of life that both encourages and challenges us. Being baptised means we are to carry each other on our shoulders while being carried by Christ. This can be deeply challenging, making us confront all in us that is fearful, judgemental, and selfish. And so, just as sheep find refuge in the fold and also need open pasture for nourishment, so each baptised person finds refuge and pasture in the life of prayer and forgiveness, the voice of conscience, the words of Scripture, and the worship of the Church especially in the breaking of bread at Holy Communion where we receive Jesus' transformative presence into our hands and hearts.

This sense of belonging connects to the most poignant aspect of the Good Shepherd. That he lays down his life for his sheep. This is how he shows how they belong to him and he to them. Again, most parents have sense of this. For what good parent does not daily lay down their lives for their children? Or, for that matter, what good friend, spouse, partner, sibling, teacher, doctor, citizen does not do that for another? In the fullness of his humanity, Jesus reveals this to be the truth of God's own life as he willing gives his life away for us. This is why it is fitting that Joseph and Alice are being baptised during this season of

Easter. By his suffering, death and rising again to new life on Easter Day, Jesus shows that nothing can overcome the love God has for each person. In baptism, we are all drenched in Christ's dying and rising to new life in love. This means we are never good parents, friends, partners, sons, daughters, human beings simply in our own strength. We get things wrong. And yet the good news given in baptism is that the worst we do is never the final word.

However young or old we may be, in baptism, we are called and empowered by the Holy Spirit to share the love of Christ, to run free in it, to splash its life-giving waters everywhere, to play, wonder, explore, and rejoice in hope, truth, and justice especially when confronted by difficulty. Not only does Christ carry us on his shoulders so that we may carry others, but we carry Christ to others as he rides on our shoulders bouncing like a child full of wonder and concern for everything.

The sense of belonging that comes through baptism can never become exclusive. The life of the church, if it is true to God's love shown in Christ, must always flow beyond itself. Jesus says there will be one shepherd and one flock. It is because all people belong to God that we all belong to the one flock of humanity. Joseph and Alice, supported by us, today become a vital part of the vocation of all the baptised: to build up a common sense of human belonging in which no one is left out, not according to wealth, health, status, ethnicity,

age, sexuality, gender, ability or anything else. And just as Joseph and Alice discovered a place of belonging and play here at Little Fishes, we all discover how to belong within the actual relationships of our lives. We learn how to love everyone only by learning how continually to lay down our lives for specific others in our homes, families, friendships, and communities. These are the folds and pastures that the Good Shepherd calls Joseph and Alice to today in baptism. He bids us to accompany them, rejoicing as we do.