

SHEEP FOOD

It goes without saying that major festivals (e.g., Christmas and Easter) are important for the life of the Church. The Church year is ordered around the life of Christ, drawing us into the story of salvation. Instead of ordering our lives around the secular calendar, the pattern of Jesus' life becomes the pattern for our days: birth, suffering, death, resurrection. These highlights of Jesus' story are highlighted in the Creed: "born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. The third day He rose again from the dead." These events in the Christ-story were not put into the creed arbitrarily. St. Paul describes these events of being "as of first importance," "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures," (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

The Church year highlights these central events, especially during the seasons of Advent and Christmas (birth), Lent (suffering and death), and Easter (resurrection). These four events also form the pattern for the Christian life. The Church is the Mother of every Christian, who gives birth to her children through water and the Word in Holy Baptism. After birth (baptism) comes suffering and death: daily contrition and repentance, the putting of the Old Adam to death with all sins and evil desires. But then comes the resurrection: a New Man emerges and arises to live before God in righteousness and purity forever. The pattern of our lives follows the pattern of our Lord's, birth, suffering, death, resurrection. A disciple is like his Master (Matthew 10:24); a sheep is like its Shepherd.

After resurrection comes ascension, creed-wise ("The third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven..."). But sometimes in moving directly from resurrection to ascension, we risk forgetting what happened during the interim. Jesus did not rise from the grave and immediately ascend into heaven. Instead, He spent 40 days giving further instruction to His disciples. As St. Luke writes, "[Jesus] presented Himself alive to them after His suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God," (Acts 1:3). During this time, Jesus taught Peter about caring for His flock, saying, "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17). Such feeding is necessary so that those newly born of water and the Spirit might live by faith (resurrection) amid suffering and death. Living by faith is not something we accomplish by our own reason or strength, but only by the grace of God.

So that His flock might be fed, God gives pastors to His Church. Every pastor feeds his flock. The question is not, "Is the flock being fed?" but rather, "what are they eating?" Are they being fed with the pure Word of God or something else? When something else becomes the main course, whether it's psychology, motivational speaking, ten steps to a better life, etc., pastors cease being pastors and sheep cease being sheep. Suffering and death will still come, but there will be no resurrection. While insights drawn from psychology and the business world can be utilised with profit in caring for souls, it is the view of the Lord Jesus that the best sheep food on the market is theology. Far from being an abstract, other-worldly, and irrelevant pursuit, the love of theology yields concrete, practical, and relevant nourishment for every child of God. The Word alone can raise us up to new life. As Jesus told the tempter, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God," (Matthew 4:4).

So it is the sacred task of the pastor, as the under-shepherd of the Lord, to feed the flock with the Word, and in particular, with those means of grace to which the Word testifies. In the collect for the installation of a pastor, we pray: "O almighty God, by Your Son, our Saviour, You have always given to Your Church on earth faithful shepherds to guide and feed Your flock. Therefore we pray, make all pastors diligent to preach Your holy Word and to administer Your means of grace..."

God gives pastors to His Church so that His flock might be fed and brought to saving faith. This happens when and where the Holy Spirit wills when the Gospel is taught and the Sacraments are

administered (Augsburg Confession, V). These are the means by which faith is created and strengthened, enabling us to live a life of daily contrition, repentance, and resurrection. While insights from psychology, leadership, and other secular disciplines may benefit the church from time to time, the faithful pastor will always ensure that Word and Sacrament is the main course.