

## Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Jun 7th 2013

Today we celebrate the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. For many years I found devotion to the Sacred Heart troublesome. The image of Jesus holding a heart on fire and surrounded by a crown of thorns did little for my spirituality. I was embarrassed because this is a central devotion for my Jesuit order.

Yet today I find myself drawn to the image of the Sacred Heart. Today's readings give solid scriptural depth for the devotion. Interestingly, the liturgy uses images of the Good Shepherd from both Old and New Testaments to "flesh out" the meaning of the Sacred Heart.

In Ezekiel, the Good Shepherd brings back the scattered sheep: "I will rescue them from every place where they were scattered when it was cloudy and dark. In good pastures I will pasture them. The lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up."

In Psalm 23, the Good Shepherd walks with the sheep even amid dangers: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He guides me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk in a dark valley I fear no evil for you are at my side."

In Luke, the Good Shepherd risks everything to rescue just one sheep: "What man among you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them would not leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the lost one until he finds it?"

Assurance of God's unconditional love is the deepest need of human hearts. The Good Shepherd is the scriptural image of this assurance. Miraculously through his appearances to a French nun - St. Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647-1690) - Jesus himself gives the world the assurance of God's love by appearing to her as the Sacred Heart. Could there be a more eloquent image!

A bit of personal advice. Are you stressed? For myself the greatest antidote for relief in the midst of stress is recalling Jesus' presence as the Sacred Heart while breathing rhythmically my favorite mantra: "The Lord/Is my Shepherd/There is nothing/I shall want."

It always works.

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