

*Readings*

Acts 13:14, 43-52  
Ps 100:1-2, 3, 5  
Rev 7:9, 14b-17  
Jn 10:27-30

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The Conclave began on Wednesday. As we celebrate liturgy this weekend either a successor to Pope Francis has been elected or the discussions, voting and prayer continue. And while we may wait and pray, people are wondering not just who the next pope might be but also in what direction will he lead or shepherd the church.

“Shepherd” is one of the images we often use to describe the Pope’s ministry. And not just the Pope, but bishops and all who may serve in the church. Pope Francis would refer to this image in an address to clergy saying that they must live and work as “shepherds with the ‘smell of sheep.’”

In our Gospel, Jesus speaks of himself as a shepherd who knows his sheep. As we think about the people called as his first disciples he got to know them very well – their goodness as well as their idiosyncrasies. He accepted them as they were but also encouraged them to grow. And the people who came into his life, some with a need, some just to hear him, and some of whom might have been seen as “unacceptable,” He listened to them and treated them with dignity and respect. He would ultimately lay down his life for his sheep. This could have been the example Jesus hoped Peter would follow when he said to him “Tend my sheep,” “Feed my lambs,” Care for my people.

At this time, the Word of God may focus our attention on what's happening at the Vatican. The Word speaks to us of Jesus' intimate relationship with us and our relationships with other people. "I know my sheep." Jesus knows each of us very well. He knows our strengths and weaknesses, our successes and our failures, the choices we make whether they are healthy or sometimes sinful. That can be comforting and encouraging. It can also be scary for us when we may be ashamed of our actions. However, he takes us as we are. He sticks by us, he never abandons us because he loves us and wants to show us the way to a better life.

"I know my sheep." As Jesus knows us, we too are called to know the people who are part of our lives and also at least be aware of the many people who we say are our brothers and sisters. We live in a huge world of people from many nations, races, languages, cultures and religious and even non-religious traditions. How often might we judge unfairly because we do not really know them or disregard them because they are different or may live in distant lands? How often might our lack of understanding lead to discrimination, persecution or even violence? We see that reality played out in so many parts of our nation and world and sometimes unfortunately even in our families.

The man who will be elected as the next Pope will by his words and actions shepherd the church and also bring Jesus' message to the world. We pray for him. He brings his gifts and experience to his ministry and will also come to know better the many people he will shepherd. As people of faith and followers of Jesus we are called to remember that we live in relationship and with responsibility to one another. And to help us remember this we are called to live as Jesus did, with our gifts, and experiences, and also to come to "know the sheep."