

As we continue to celebrate Easter, we listen today to readings that give us images that deepen our understanding of the Easter mystery and draw us into it. In the first reading there was the image of the stone rejected by the builders that has become the keystone. To appreciate the significance of this image we could picture a building like St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney. It is constructed of sandstone, and as you walk through it you will see archways. Ancient building techniques for buildings like this meant that they were built by placing stones one on top of another. As they got to the top, they would place one final stone at the top of the arch. This stone was called the keystone because it took all the weight of the stones on either side. It kept the building standing.

When St Peter uses this image in our first reading, he wants to communicate something important about Jesus. The first thing he notes is that Jesus is like a stone that the builders rejected. When the people listening to Peter heard this, they would understand that he was talking about the way Jesus died, rejected by the people, and with his mission looking like a total failure. But, says Peter, this stone that was rejected has turned out to be the stone that became the keystone. Without it, everything collapses. Here we have the Easter mystery presented in a nutshell: what was rejected has become the source of life. This is why Peter tells those who were listening to him that there is no other name by which any of us can be saved than by the name of Jesus.

The gospel has a very different image, that of the good shepherd. It is an image that Jesus applies to himself. The shepherd image was popular in the Old Testament and was often used to point to the wealth and prominence of a leader. To have a large flock of sheep was to be a wealthy person. The prophets often referred to God as the shepherd. In that sense, God was supremely wealthy. The point of referring to God this way was also to say something about the flock – about the people of God. They are priceless; they are prized and loved by God. So, the image of the shepherd and the flock speaks of God's infinite concern for all his people.

Jesus applies this image to himself and calls himself the Good Shepherd. We usually use the word "good" in a moral sense, but I don't think that is how Jesus is using it. To say that he is the good shepherd is to say that he is attractive in the sense that people want to follow him, they are attracted to him. This attractiveness and goodness come from the fact that he is willing

to lay down his life for his sheep. This distinguished the good shepherd from the hired hand. The hired hand doesn't have the same interest in the sheep as does the shepherd. The shepherd keeps the flock in sight all the time, even during the night; he keeps a watch out for danger and protects the sheep. He is even prepared to die so that the sheep might be protected. Here, once again, we have the Easter mystery presented in a nutshell. It is the mystery of death that leads to life. It is the mystery of God's plan that all people have life and have it to the full.

From Jesus' words today, perhaps the strongest indication of the care of the shepherd for the sheep is the fact that the shepherd calls the sheep by name, and they respond. So, this image is a very personal one. Here is another aspect of the Easter mystery: being a Christian is not about being committed to an idea; rather it is about being attracted to Jesus, who is so close to us that he knows us by name. He loves us, and we love him in return.

For some people, it is hard to accept that they are unconditionally loved by God. They might believe that God loves them sometimes, but they encounter many times when they feel that God doesn't love them or has abandoned them. Sometimes, they might feel like the stone that has been rejected. That sense of rejection can come from many sources. It might be that life has become difficult or that there is suffering. It might be that they feel they aren't living up to what they think God expects of them, or even what they expect of themselves. It might be that Christian faith is difficult in a world that sometimes scorns faith. But what we hear today in the readings is that Jesus loves us unconditionally. He loves us to such an extent that he is prepared to lay down his life for our safety.

Easter invites us to participate in his life. The Christian life doesn't remove all the difficulties that are part of every life. Rather, the Christian life is lived with hope because we know that Jesus is the Good Shepherd who loves us unconditionally.