



# The Good Shepherd Icon

Rev. Ricardo Chinchilla, CJM

The icon of the Good Shepherd is a masterpiece of the early Christian community spirituality; the image of the Good Shepherd is the most common of the symbolic representations of Christ found in Early Christian art in the Catacombs of Rome.

The Gospel of John chapter 10 vividly describes: “I am the good shepherd...the shepherd gives his life for his sheep.” But unfortunately, the Good Shepherd literary image in the gospel

was never physically represented after Jesus’ resurrection because the Jewish context of the first century forbade producing graven images of faces or keeping them as possessions.

With the expansion of the Gospel to Greek and Roman areas where persecutions took place, some images started to appear in catacombs and in personal possessions (e.g., a Good Shepherd ring was found recently in a shipwreck in Caesarea, see right).



The sheep on Jesus’ shoulders looks peaceful and “cute,” but a sheep that had escaped the fold and got lost would not look like that.

On the contrary, it would be dirty and smelly, and a regular shepherd would not show pity for it; once he found the lost sheep, he would proceed to break or unhinge its leg to prevent its escape in the future. He would not be too lenient or loving because that sheep represents a risk for him; he would prefer to let it die than to risk the welfare of the rest of the flock.

Jesus speaking to the Pharisees paints a different scenario: the sheep inside the fold represent those who are persevering in God’s laws, and the Pharisees should be loving shepherds who bring every lost sheep back into the fold. Nice thought, but that was not what the Pharisees were doing, they were keeping them out. The fold became the place for shepherds alone—no dirty sheep were to be inside the temple, and no rescuing of sheep—only caring for self.

Jesus tells us in the parable the extreme lengths the true shepherd will go in order not to lose even one of the sheep. Instead, he will bring them back on his shoulders (as in the icon)—no matter how dirty, neglected, or wild they were.

The sheep on Jesus’ shoulders icon will be clearly understood when Jesus carried his cross on his shoulders; that is what he meant, that’s how far he was willing to go so that you and I would not remain lost, not only here on earth but possibly lost for eternity.

He would traverse the valley of death to look and find each of us and tell his father: “Forgive them for they know not what they are doing,” and he was so right.

Read Psalm 23 and humbly ask him to carry you back to the fold daily.