“The Lord is my shepherd there is nothing I shall want.” (Psalm 23:1) We all need a shepherd and we will often seek one to lead us and to provide for our nourishment and security. Sadly, what we often get is a hireling or a thief who is in it for pay, or even worse, to ‘steal and slaughter and destroy.’ This is what is common (and even expected) in secular society, but it is also true in religious societies. This is true today as it was in Jesus’ time. Who do we want for a shepherd and how do we find him?

Do you want a leader to take you into battle, to vanquish the enemies, and win for you the crown of victory? Or… Are you ready to walk into the dark valley and to take courage in His presence only? Are you ready to follow His example and to lay down your life for another? Or… Would you rather defend your property and way of life with violence?

How will you find your leader? “Seek the Lord while he may still be found, call to him while he is still near.” (Isaiah 55:6) When he responds, will you recognize his voice? The sheep of his fold will recognize his voice. He walks ahead of you and he will “lead you where you do not want to go.” (John 21:18c) Are you ready to follow a leader such as this? You may ask, “Is there another leader I can follow?” Surely there are other leaders and many who wish you to follow them. They have climbed over elsewhere and they are neither the gatekeeper nor the shepherd. We have followed them in the past and may even be following them now. The question is, “Where are they going?” Listen to their voice, what are they promising?

Does their voice sound like Jesus, because they promise reconciliation and forgiveness so that we might be one people? Or, do they sound demonic because they seek to divide and
conquer? Do they operate in the darkness like a thief to ‘steal and slaughter and destroy,’ or do they live in the light, to nourish, heal, and bring new life? Do they go low and drag us down with them or do they go high to inspire us with high ideals and to dare greatly? Do they play to our weakness or to our strength?

Today is set before us, life and good, death and evil. We can focus on judging and condemn, punishing and excluding; or we can seek peace and reconciliation by acting for justice. We can be agents of transformation (for us and others) if we choose to follow the Shepherd and his ways. The shepherd’s way is the way of love; love of God and love of neighbor. If we do follow the good shepherd we will live and grow numerous, and the LORD, our God, will bless us. If, however, our hearts turn away and we do not obey but are led astray and bow down to other gods and serve them, we will certainly perish. (cf Deuteronomy 30:15-18)

In today's Gospel selection Jesus was clear and he used terms that the Pharisees would understand, but because of their hardness of heart, they rejected his message. Are we ready to receive the forgiveness and understanding Jesus offers us today so our hearts will be opened? If we open our hearts to follow a true shepherd, perhaps we will hear and recognize his voice, and follow him? It will not be an easy path, Jesus didn't promise that (Matthew 5:11), but it is the path that ultimately leads to life and abundance.