Homily 4th Sunday of Easter

My elder son, John Andrew, wanted 'a pond' for his 4th birthday. Alice took, both he and his brother James who was but an infant, away for the afternoon whilst I dug the hole where the plastic membrane for the pond would be placed. Eventually, the pond was completed with some plants and stones around the edges secured by some quick setting concrete. When the rest of the family returned, we ceremoniously put two gold-fish in the pond and John named them Charlie Bunkstunk and Little Jumping Up and Down. He loved those fish and every morning during that summer he would check his two little friends. He was so worried about a lurking heron that he asked me to construct a wire frame to protect his little fish.

Jesus in today's Gospel states 'I am the Good Shepherd'. This is one of the several 'I AM' statements in St John's Gospel: I am the Bread of Life'; 'I am the The Light of the World'; 'I am the Resurrection and the Life' etc. The 'I AM' refers to the name God gave to Moses when he asked, 'Who do I tell the people who sent me?' and God replies, 'I AM WHO I AM!'. It is clear therefore that in each of Jesus' 'I AM' statements that He is claiming to be one with God The Father - that He too is indeed God.

Without knowing a little about the life of a shepherd in Palestine at the time of Christ it is impossible to comprehend the richness of the image of the 'Good Shepherd'. Shepherds would tend large flocks of sheep mainly in the hill country. Sheep were kept for wool and so they spent their entire life with the shepherd. The shepherd knew each sheep by name 'Wooly', 'Patch', 'Skippy' etc. He would sleep at the gap in the 'pen' where the sheep slept to ensure that they were safe (Thus 'I am the Gate of the Sheepfold'). As each sheep made its morning exit from the fold the shepherd would use a staff with a large ball at its top (or his crook) to bar each animal's exit to make his daily health check.

The shepherd would always go ahead of the sheep to ward off any wild preying animals and if he did encounter a threat to his beloved sheep, he would use the aforementioned staff to ward it off and if necessary, strike it with the lethal ball. Shepherds worked in teams and that is why a shepherd could 'leave the ninety-nine sheep and go after the stray' - losing a sheep was like losing a family member. The crook was a useful tool to grab the sheep by its neck if it was caught in briar or on a cliff edge. There were no sheep dogs but a sling and some stones (Remember David killing Goliath with a stone from his sling) acted as a useful means to direct and redirect the sheep, the shepherd accurately projecting the stones to turn the flock in the direction he wished them to go in. The shepherd in summary loved his sheep unconditionally, even to his own death.

In Today's Second Reading from John's Book of The Apocalypse he describes a vision of the heavenly Banquet of the Marriage Feast of The Lamb. St John claims The Lamb of God, Jesus, to be The Shepherd of His People. It is interesting to note that in the theology of The Eucharist that the Entrance Procession and Introductory Rite unite us not only with The Apostles in The Upper Room of The Last Supper but also with the angels and saints in the heavenly Marriage Banquet of The Lamb and indeed with our relatives and friends who have gone to their rest with God. This is a

stunningly beautiful reality of The Mass uniting us with our deceased mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, aunts, uncles and cousins....

Having built that pond way back in 1989 I remember seeing a little disappointment initially on the face of my little 4year-old son. I asked him what was the matter to which he replied, 'Daddy I wanted a swimming pond!'. In spite of this, in the spirit of a true shepherd John Andrew loved those fish and cried uncontrollably when they eventually died. I am sure Christ, The Good Shepherd, cries similarly every time we go astray or fail to follow a him as true missionary disciples.