

# the Sunday Readings



*'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep' (John 10:11)*

## **4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**

**Life in the Spirit of the Risen Jesus – part IV**

# 4<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY of EASTER

## Life in the Spirit of the Risen Jesus – part IV

### *giving of ourselves*<sup>1</sup>

#### introduction

Today's gospel has left a deep impression in the imaginations of the Christian community. One of the earliest representations of Jesus in Christian art was that of, *a good shepherd*. *The good shepherd* knows his sheep and even calls them by name. In the Scriptures, 'to know' is 'to love'. *The good shepherd* 'loves' his sheep and they 'love' the shepherd. The expression used in John, is almost that of the covenant's, "I will be your God and you will be my people".<sup>2</sup>

And, *the good shepherd*, 'lays down his life for his sheep'.<sup>3</sup> The Easter Season's readings focus on the positive outcome of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus. Our central Christian theme following Easter Day, is relevant to the mythologising of the modern ANZAC Day remembrance – the solemnising of the memory of all who made the supreme sacrifice in war-time. In our gathering today, we remember the good news of God's victory in Jesus, *the good shepherd*, over the power of death. We remember too, the Gallipoli event and how it has become one of the foundational myths of our identity as a nation, based on the sacrifice of all our servicemen and women, who made the supreme sacrifice in time of war.

#### first reading: Acts 4: 8 – 12<sup>4</sup>

[ Peter is arrested and speaks before the Jewish Council ]

*Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders,(8) if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed,(9) let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.(10) This Jesus is, 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.'(11) There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."(12).*

1 Front Cover image: – in John, Jesus is identified as a shepherd who *knows* his sheep, just as the sheep know him (Jn 8:11-18). Good leaders and those they serve are one community, growing in mutual affection and trust. In the same way, Pope Francis writes that those who evangelize in Jesus' name should be profoundly involved in the lives of those they are called to evangelize. See *Evangelii Gaudium* §24.

2 Lv. 26:12

3 Jn.10:11

4 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

Many voices today call for a restriction on the message of God to '*spiritual matters*'. However the message includes proclaiming that Jesus and his power brings newness and healing to people who are crippled economically. Peter and John are called before the Jewish Supreme Court and in the presence of the priests, temple police and Sadducees, they are interrogated about the healing of a lame man.<sup>5</sup>

Peter identifies Jesus as, *the Messiah*, or, *the Lord God's anointed*,<sup>6</sup> who although not recognised by the Israelite religious leadership, immersed his cause in history to its completion. The promise of Luke is fulfilled.<sup>7</sup> Peter had been systematically apprenticed in Jesus' settled instincts and performance skills – so that he and the other disciples can reproduce in the new era the same prophetic activity by which the '*lost sheep of the House of Israel*' are lured back to *the Living Torah* and complete God's reigning. The disciples' healing action continue the prophetic power to transformed reality out beyond the first Christian community. Peter defines the disciples' activity as, '*calling on Jesus' name*'. To be acting, '*in the name of Christ the Nazarene*', was interpreting their performance of the skills of Jesus in living '*the Torah of the God of history*'.

Peter quotes *Psalm 118:22*. Originally this psalm referred to defeated Jerusalem, '*raised up by the Lord (God)*'. God's *power for life-giving*, or *grace*, raised up '*Jesus as Saviour*'. If salvation, in the sense of physical well-being, is present '*in his name*'; and the man cured of lameness is evidence of this; then salvation in the religious sense, must also be in the power and authority of the God of history, disclosed by Jesus' prophetic activity. The duty of the disciples of Jesus is to proclaim '*the name*' boldly. No religious or secular authority can compel silence. This proclaiming, liberates and cures, by opening up *the power for life-giving and transformation*. At the same time, it awakens fear and repression.

**response: Psalm 118 : 1, 8 – 9, 21 – 23, 26, 28 – 29**

[ A song of victory ]

*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;  
his steadfast love endures forever.(1) . . .  
It is better to take refuge in the Lord,  
than to put confidence in mortals.(8)  
It is better to take refuge in the Lord,  
than to put confidence in princes,(9) . . .  
I thank You that You have answered me  
and have become my salvation.(21)  
The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the chief cornerstone.(22)*

---

5 Cf. Ac.3:1-10

6 '*Christos*' in Greek

7 Cf. Lk.12:11-12

*This is the Lord's doing;  
it is marvellous in our eyes.(23) . . .  
Blessed is the one who comes  
in the name of the Lord.  
We bless you from the house of the Lord.(26) . . .  
You are my God, and I will give thanks to You;  
You are my God, I will extol You.(28)  
O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,  
for his steadfast love endures forever.(29)*

The speaker is in a situation of urgent distress surrounded by the enemies of goodness and the enemies of God, who attack like a swarm of angry bees and cause him to be all but given up for lost. But God intervenes so that the speaker – while deeply wounded – will live to rule with justice. The message of the Easter Day and the open tomb, permeates this psalm. For Christian disciples the speaker reminds us that the resurrection lies at the heart of faith in God. The psalmist expresses gratitude (vv.1-2) and announces to all within earshot, the arrival of people to celebrate the Lord's presence – so the gates of the holy City should be opened wide to receive them.

As the ruler in ancient Israel entered the temple and climbed the steps to the throne, it was imagined a new and decorative stone had been added to the temple structure which finished what the builders of the temple had left incomplete.<sup>8</sup> For Christians, Jesus is this stone, that the Lord God has chosen as the cornerstone. '*The blessed One*' (v.26) is, the '*King of kings*'. And '*the day that the Lord has made*' (v.24) isn't an annually repeated occasion, but a *once-and-for-all moment* leading from humiliation to exaltation of *the Messiah*. The raising of Jesus, completes the meaning of this enthronement song in the setting of a new age. Peter quotes this *Psalms*.<sup>9</sup> Today the Christian community, understanding itself as a building, sees Jesus as, '*the cornerstone*' that beautifies and completes the structure.

**second reading: 1 John 3: 1 – 2**

[ what God's children will be, has not yet been revealed ]

*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.(1) Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.(2)*

The writer of *the first letter of John* speaks about a future life with God – but he reminds us that the life with God is going on right here and now. To act justly is

8 [v.22] '*The stone the builders rejected*': A proverb meaning that what is insignificant to human beings has become great through divine election. The '*stone*' may originally have meant *the foundation stone* or *capstone* of the temple. The New Testament interpreted the verse as referring to the death and resurrection of Christ (cf *Mt.21:42; Ac.4:11; cf. Is.28:16 and Rm.9:33; 1 Pt.2:7*).

9 1 *Pt.* 2:7

to show the disciples are in God's camp. That is, to be God's child. What the Father is, the Son is. What the Son is, characterises the Christian disciple. The Israelite Scriptures often portray the people as *'adopted sons and daughters of the Lord'* and link this adoption with the covenant and the demand that they live as God's children. In a world organised around the patriarchal household where the human father was the central organising focus, to be called, *'child of God'*, offered an alternative way of understanding oneself and one's loyalties.

The writer makes the point that believers are known to be *children of God* because they are rejected. *'The world'* does not recognise God's children because it doesn't recognise God (v.1b). But the title, *'child of God'* helps Christians to face the future of confidence. While no power or attractiveness sets the children of God apart, they are in fact set apart, because they share with Jesus, rejection by outsiders. Those within the believing community, don't need to earn the title *'children of God'*. That has already occurred and doesn't need to be earned. The future, however, will bring change in those children that cannot be predicted or analysed – only brought about by God (v.2). In the present, Christians are confident they are God's children. That's the name they have been given. Jesus' return is in the future – therefore God hasn't fully been revealed. But the principle of likeness is a source of confidence in the status of Christians into the future.

**gospel reading: John 10 : 11 – 18**

[ Jesus the good shepherd ]

*Jesus said, 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep' (11). The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away – and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.(12) The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.(13) I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,(14) just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.(15) I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. (16) For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.(17) No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."(18)*

Christians understand who Christ really is, by believing in him and assuming the challenge of discipleship. The fourth gospel presents a sharp contrast between Jesus and all the other alternatives. All other would-be leaders are false and damage people, while Jesus is the true leader. The gospel writer has Jesus attacking all kinds of corrupt leaders when he says: *"I am the good shepherd . . ."*

The Pharisees claim to be good shepherds in reforming religious life. In the parable, Jesus accuses them of being mere hirelings. The Israelite commentators

on *the Torah* or *Law of Moses*, outline the responsibilities of hirelings which limit their liability in times of danger or damage. Jesus in contrast, will give his life without conditions. The Pharisees use their positions of power and standing in the community for their own advantage, but when the costs get too personal they 'walk away' from laying down their lives.

Jesus supplies 'the light',<sup>10</sup> 'the living water',<sup>11</sup> 'the truth',<sup>12</sup> and 'the food of life',<sup>13</sup> and now he offers *fullness of life (secure pastures)*. This is the very opposite to what the Pharisee party were offering: no guarantees of protection or security, or peace. Jesus is God's WORD, inviting people to a close union with God. That union shows itself in his willingness to lay down his life freely. Jesus wasn't the messiah the Israelite religious leaders had been expecting. Jesus was not 'the Christ' who would guarantee the Israelite's superiority, or the continuance of the power of their religious leadership.

In wanting power, the Pharisee movement insist on being like the other groups around them. Replacing devotion to the Lord, with misplaced respect for substitutes (hirelings). It happened at an earlier stage in Israelite history with David and Solomon. Samuel had warned that every Earthly ruler is a thief and a brigand. The good leader is more like a guide, who dissociates from seeking this kind of power and focuses on the power to, "*lay down one's life*" for others – the power *to raise up bodies that are hungry, sick, dead*. We could re-name the passage, as the description of *the good leader*.

for sharing:<sup>14</sup>

- *Peter is arrested and speaks before the Jewish Council. Comment on Acts 4 : 8 – 12*
- *What God's children will be has not yet been revealed. Comment on 1 John 3 : 1 – 2*
- *Jesus the good shepherd. Comment on John 10 : 11 – 18*

---

10 Jn.8:12

11 Jn.7:38

12 Jn.5:33

13 Jn.6:51

14 Lectio Divina: There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio (reading)* – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio (reflection)* – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in God's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio (prayer)* – allow your heart to speak to God, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio (rest)* – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of God, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'.

**prayer:**<sup>15</sup>

*God of lasting love,  
 fulfil Your plan of salvation  
 to gather into one fold  
 the peoples of the whole world.  
 Let everyone on Earth  
 recognise Your Christ as the Good Shepherd,  
 who freely lays down his life for all  
 to take it up again in power.  
 Grant this through Jesus Christ,  
 the resurrection and the life,  
 who lives and reigns with You  
 in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
 God for ever and ever. Amen.*

**review**<sup>16</sup>

*At the ANZAC dawn service, the parade commander announces – ‘As the dawn light is now about to pierce the night, so let the memory of those who did not return inspire us to work for the coming of the new light into the dark places of the world – we will remember them’.*

*On ANZAC Day we remember Gallipoli, the Somme, Crete, the Western Desert, Monte Cassino, Korea, Malaysia, Afganistan, Timor Leste, at sea, in the air; in times of war, and in times of peace-keeping, our Army, Navy, and Air Force personnel have served unselfishly and bravely. Many of us could share stories of members of our families, which stir a sense of community in us for what they did and what it meant to be together in adversity.*

*There’s another story – the story of Easter – it is about an empty tomb. We Christians believe the empty tomb is the sign of the Resurrection of Jesus – of God’s victory over death. We express confidence that the tombs of all those who died in the service of our country, are also empty! We believe that their sacrifice is not in vain.*

*To paraphrase the opening words of ANZAC morning’s parade commander: ‘As the dawn has now pierced the night, the memory of those who served, inspires us to work for the coming of the new light into the dark places of the world – we will remember them’. Amen.*

-----000000-----

---

15 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL’s 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

16 the review – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the Word and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.