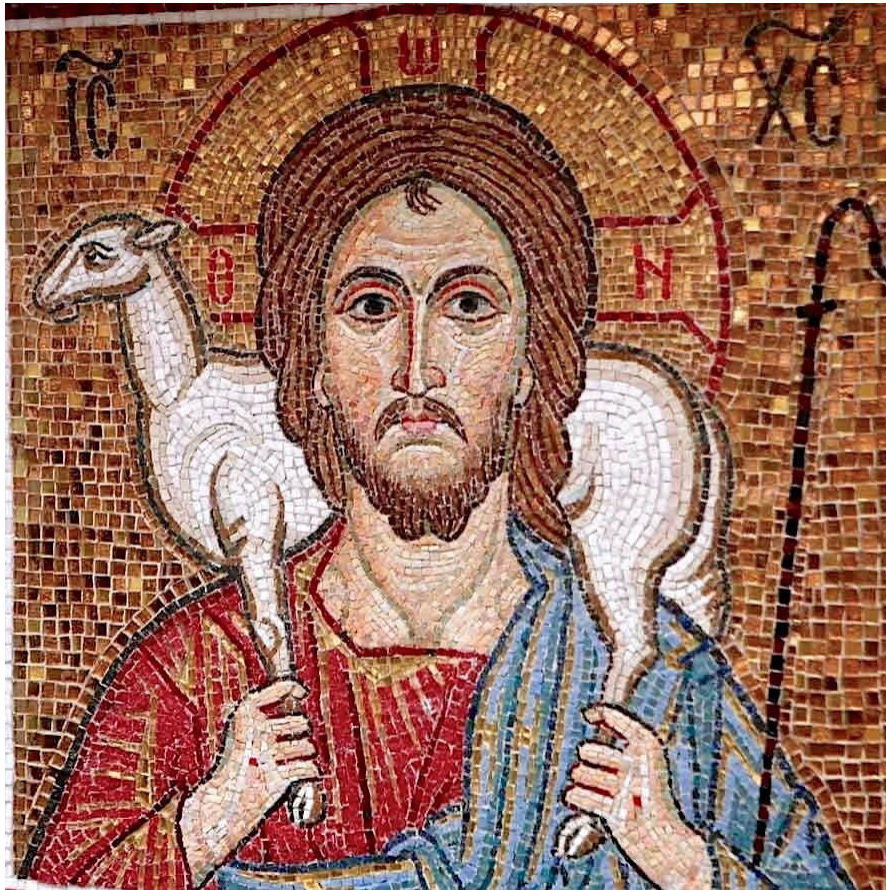


the Sunday Readings



My sheep hear my voice. I know them & they follow me. I give them eternal life & they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. (Jn.10 : 27-28)

4th Sunday of Easter

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*listening to Jesus and following him*¹

introduction

Christians understand who Christ is, by listening to his Word of invitation to be his disciples. Jesus gave his best energies to extend the transforming power of God's holy Spirit, through the practice of his disciples. Today, we find the power of the same holy Spirit moving within our own story as Jesus' disciples. We harness our own personal powers with the power of God's holy Spirit, or we become stumbling blocks in this task of extending God's reigning.

John's gospel has just presented Jesus as, *'the Good Shepherd'* who lays down his life for his sheep. The framework of the gospel as well as today's passage, is one of conflict with the leaders of the Israelite people. Between Jesus and his disciples there is a dialogue based on mutual knowledge. Here, the relationship between the Lord and those who listen to his Word is expressed in rural images understandable for Jesus' audience. It's the relationship between shepherd and sheep.

first reading: Acts 13 : 14, 43 – 52²

[Paul and Barnabas in Antioch of Pisidia]

Now Paul and his company passed on from Perga and came to Antioch of Pisidia. And on the sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down.(14) . . . , And when the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who spoke to them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.(43) The next sabbath almost the whole city gathered together to hear the word of God.(44) But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with jealousy, and contradicted what was spoken by Paul, and reviled him.(45) And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, "It was necessary that the Word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles.(46) For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, 'I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the uttermost parts of the Earth.'"(47) And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the Word of God; and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.(48) And the Word of the Lord spread throughout all the region.(49) But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, and stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas and drove them out of their district.(50) But they shook off the dust from their feet against them and went to Iconium.(51) And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.(52)

1 Cover Icon: Jesus the Good Shepherd.

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

Paul addressed an assembly of Israelites and *devout converts*, or '*fearers of God*', in Pisidian Antioch. These '*fearers of God*' were probably born non-Israelites and had been attracted to Judaism but were not prepared to undergo circumcision to become full converts.³

The action moves with the assembly to the outside of the synagogue. The response to Paul's basic message about Christianity, resembles the favourable response that first greeted Jesus when he presented himself in the synagogue in Nazareth in Galilee at the beginning of his public ministry.⁴ Paul capped the holy God's deeds in Israelite history with God's raising Jesus from the dead. Paul affirms Jesus is, '*Son of the holy God*' (v.33) and '*Saviour of all the world*' (v.23). The apostle affirms that the holy God establishes a new realm quite different from David's. This new realm explodes the old exclusive conceptions that Paul's audience entertained about themselves and their world.

Throughout *Luke/Acts*, it is God's agents who proclaim an inclusive message at the Israelite or pagan holy places. This proclaiming provokes both faith and hostility. The response of the proclaimers, when their message is resisted, is to move away from the rejection and to reach out to new audiences with their message. Paul interprets rejection as a signal that it is time to turn to people who were originally beyond his range of concern. He doesn't interpret rejection as a sign of defeat or weakness. For Paul, rejection by the Israelites spells opportunities for non-Israelites. The movement outwards to include gentiles had not been foreseen. Paul develops a scriptural basis from the Israelite tradition for his movement: proclaim God's '*new Word*' first to the Israelites, for that was God's plan originally, but it is also necessary that this Word be offered to non-Israelites.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, new people are invited to enter the community. They are invited to make their own the continuing story of the Risen Jesus. God's agent (Paul) calls these new people to base their lives on Israelite history; to let it nurture them and give them meaning, but they are challenged by the practise of Paul and the other apostles, to move beyond the Israelite tradition.

response: Psalm 100 : 1 – 3, 5

[All lands summoned to praise God]

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the Earth.(1)

Worship the Lord with gladness;

come into his presence with singing.(2)

3 Pisidian Antioch was high on the central plateau of modern-day Turkey. The setting at the start of Paul's missionary activity is the local synagogue.

4 Cf. *Lk.4:16-22*. The key event in Luke's account of the first missionary journey is the experience of Paul and Barnabas at Pisidian Antioch. The Christian good news proclaimed by Paul in the synagogue was favourably received. Some Jews and "God-fearers" became interested and invited the missionaries to speak again on the following sabbath (v.42). By that time, however, the appearance of a large number of Gentiles from the city had so disconcerted the Jews that they became hostile toward the apostles (vv.44-50).

*Know that the Lord is God.
It is he that made us,
and we are his; we are his people,
and the sheep of his pasture.(3) . . . ,
For the Lord is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.(5)*

The speaker reflects that the ending of the old realm is marked by entry into the presence of the holy One; that is, the entry of a new people into the temple in Jerusalem. The reflection becomes a meditation praising the Lord. There is a call for joyful singing approaching the holy One's throne (vv.1-2,4). The attitude is that of yielding to the Lord, the God of the covenant, as is proper to their identity as a covenant-keeping people. The speaker is like the delighted non-Israelites in *Acts*.⁵ They have experienced the Lord's steadfast love (v.5a) and faithfulness (v.5b). The non-Israelites in *Acts*, rejoiced in the new realm of God announced by Paul. They are "outsiders" who have been turned into "insiders!"

The speaker isn't specific about the occasion of such a reversal, but merely reflects that the ending of the old realm is marked by entry into the presence of "the holy One"—that is, the entry of this new people into the temple in Jerusalem. The calling of those for whom alienation has ended and a new ordering of life has opened up, seeks a response of uncalculating yielding of their selves and their community to the Lord. The calling and the response are based on the Lord's relationship to the people as their Creator and Ruler of history. The responding ones, praise the holy One who is good, loyal, and faithful.

The prayer speaks out of the human reality of sin and death which may restrain or sober wild expressions of joy. These human realities are submitted to the reality of the Lord and once submitted, they are overwhelmed by the stronger reality of the Lord. The Lord's steadfast love (v.5) overrides any cause of anguish.

second reading: Revelation 7 : 9, 14 – 17

[The multitude from every nation]

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.(9) . . . , I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.(14) For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.(15) They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;(16) for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will

5 Cf Ac.13:48

guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."(17)

The Seer visions a *new People of God*. In an earlier scene, the Seer speaks of strict limits on the numbers saved: one hundred and forty-four thousand from the Israelite tribes only.⁶ This restriction are immediately contradicted in the vision which follows. The vast numbers of this crowd of people, their universal origin, their white garments and the palms they hold in their hands, symbolise the whole of humanity redeemed by Christ. The white garments and the palms are symbols of divine life and the victory over the powers of death.⁷

The "*great trial*"(v.13) out of which they have come and of which they are the product, is *the trial of the Lamb*. The Seer identifies Jesus with *the lamb of sacrifice* (vv.16-17) offered by the Israelites before their liberation from Egypt.⁸ Only Jesus (the Lamb), by his sacrificial death is able to restore humankind to free access to divine life. The immense crowd of the redeemed, the product of that sacrificial death, is *the new People of God*.

The *new People of God* is described in words and concepts which are repeated, often word-for-word and further developed in the final part of *the Book of Revelation*, where the new Jerusalem is described.⁹ The central idea is, that this new people offer God and the Lamb an ever-lasting worship and praise. The divine life has now come to be with them. The realm of the world has become the realm of God and the Lamb. Life is complete in this praising, because all the needs of the redeemed ones (life, truth and justice) are abundantly satisfied in God's new realm.

gospel reading: John 10 : 27 – 30

[Jesus the good shepherd]

My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.(27) I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.(28) What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand.(29) The Father and I are one. . , (30)

According to John, Jesus was walking in the shelter provided by the eastern portico of the temple. He was confronted there by some Israelites who wanted him to affirm that he was the Messiah. To their confrontational approach, Jesus replies that he is a shepherd who leads and protects the lives of the people given to his charge (vv.28-30). The shepherd in Israelite tradition was a frequent symbol of the Davidic king. Jesus earlier had been speaking of himself as, *the good shepherd*.¹⁰ When the Israelites wanted to be like the other nations and have a

6 Cf Rv.7:1-8

7 Sin and demonic forces: cf vv.14-15

8 Cf. Ex.12:21ff

9 e.g. Rv.19:6-7

10 Cf. Jn.10:1-18

king, the Lord speaks to them through the prophet *Samuel*.¹¹ Samuel says: “*The king will take your sons and make them plough his fields and gather in his harvest . . . , He will take your daughters as perfumers, cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields, your vineyards and your olive groves, and give them to his officials*”.¹²

In spite of the prophet's warnings, the Israelites insist on being like the other nations. With the kings of Israel's history it very much is as Samuel had prophesied; even with David. Jesus had said earlier that hireling shepherds cared nothing for their flock and thieves come only to destroy. But *good shepherds* give the flock life.¹³ Now Jesus declares that his flock will always be safe from harm (v.28). He expands this thought by declaring that nothing can snatch the sheep from the Father's hand (v.29). For disciples, their union with God is gifted to them through their imitating Jesus' practise. Through Jesus' words, deeds, suffering and rising: the scattered flock is gathered; the lost ones are recovered; and those in the dark are brought into the light; and the dead are brought to life!

Jesus and the Father are one in their love for the flock. They are one in their opposition to the powers of death. And they are one in their power to bless, free and enliven. Jesus claims that the Son is the perfect expression of God in the world. Jesus is, ‘*the new Word of God*’, so that whoever has seen or heard Jesus, has seen and heard God.(v.30) Disciples, therefore, identify with Jesus.

for sharing: ¹⁴

- *Paul and Barnabas in Antioch of Pisidia. Comment on Acts 13 : 14, 43 – 52*
- *The multitude from every nation. Comment on Revelation 7 : 9, 14 – 17*
- *Jesus – the good shepherd. Comment on John 10 : 27 – 30*

prayer: ¹⁵

11 Cf. 1 S.8:12-17

12 1 S.8:12a,13,14

13 *Jn.*10:10

14 *Lectio Divina*: reading God's Word in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. 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 the 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*’.

*Safe in Your hand, O God,
is the flock you shepherd
through Jesus Your Son.
Lead us always to the living waters
where you promise respite and refreshment,
that we may be counted
among those who know and follow You.
We ask 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:¹⁶

Life in the Spirit/spirit of Jesus is somewhere between the old realm that still seems to have vitality and authority, and God's new realm, voiced in the texts of the liturgy. From within our ordinary round of life, we have dared to voice the Word of God like Peter among the Israelite religious leaders. We stand in fear and trembling. It is a threshold moment when the Word opens access to *the real power for life-giving*.

But at the same time, we sense fear and feel the need to suppress any changes. We note too, our fearful society, which has few enough occasions for hosting the ambiguity we experience here, when God's newness is given. In light of the Easter news, we have reason to give thanks to God for the Risen Jesus. The new reality is about God's vision for humanity – a united people under one leader.

The Eucharist is a foretaste of that kind of community – secure, well-fed, following the way of love – over against the old ways of brokenness, self-seeking and brutalising greediness. No wonder in our weariness and in our confidence we respond, "*Thanks be to God.*"

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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 Review of the Week – 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.