

the Sunday Readings



**"The thief comes only to steal & kill & destroy.
I came that they may have life & have it abundantly."
(John 10:10)**

4th SUNDAY of EASTER

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*the good shepherd*¹

introduction

During his public ministry Jesus gave his best energies to implement *the reigning of GOD*. He needed a circle of disciples to extend the transformative power of GOD's holy Spirit by their practise. Disciples either find that power of GOD's Spirit moving within their own history and harness their own personal powers with GOD's or they become, '*stumbling blocks*'. Through apprenticing, Jesus empowers others in these skills of living transformatively. There is pain, sweat and the occasional failure. But this is the stuff out of which transformation emerges. Its the basis of our deepest hope for the world.

The readings encourage reflection on Jesus' actions in the light of new crucifixions and resurrections. Disciples extend this transformation to the character and instincts of our culture. They act in the light of Jesus' powerful practise. For those who have eyes to see, this is living in the spirit/Spirit of Jesus. Today's readings invite us to recognise Jesus as the good shepherd. The image of the good shepherd has had a profound impact on our Christian consciousness and memory. John presents Jesus as the shepherd who loves the sheep and is deeply concerned about their welfare. He comes that we may have life more abundantly. Thieves come to steal, kill and destroy.

first reading: Acts 2 : 14a, 36 – 41²

[Peter addresses the crowd in Jerusalem]

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.(14a) . . . "Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that GOD has made him both LORD and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."(36) Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?"(37) Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.(38) For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the LORD our GOD calls to him."(39) And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."(40) So those who welcomed his message were baptised, and that day about three thousand persons were added.(41)

1 Cover Image: The Good Shepherd – 3rd century. The pail (of milk?) carried by the Shepherd has been seen as symbolizing the Eucharist.

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

Peter addresses a large crowd in Jerusalem on Pentecost Day. He has become the spokesman for disciples whose understanding has been transformed by meeting the Risen Jesus. The gospel of Luke has described the risen Jesus searching out confused and straying disciples in the suburbs of Jerusalem.³ Now Peter confidently witnesses to GOD's raising Jesus to life.⁴ He boldly transmits Jesus' life-giving power to a new generation of potential disciples. GOD acted in transforming the crucified One into LORD and Christ (v.36).

Peter affirms that Jesus was neither defeated, nor destroyed. He reigns! Peter expects a positive response *'from the house of Israel'* (vv.36-37) and anticipates a community transformed. His message, *'Repent and be baptised'*, expects the same response as John the Baptist expected from those the latter addressed.⁵ Repentance requires a change of attitude of mind and heart towards GOD. That's reflected in the actual goodness of the attitudes that are changed. It means living according to the apostles' teachings which in turn are derived directly from Jesus (v.42). The author of *the Acts* (Luke) links repentance with the gift of the Spirit.⁶ Christ's resurrection draws out repentance. In the reigning of GOD in Jesus, a new obedience is required of us. Our witnessing to the resurrection of Christ means shifting away from old patterns of behaviour in favour of re-orienting our understanding of: power; goods; and the access, which power and goods afford.

The sign of repentance and its first act is our baptism, *'in the name of Jesus for forgiveness of sins'*. Then resurrection is the invitation to live in a world where forgiveness prevails. The Apostles' Creed links, *'the forgiveness of sins'* and *'the resurrection of the body'*.⁷ *'The Holy Spirit'* (v.38) refers to GOD's power to create new life. Like the free movement of wind on the face of the Earth, the Wind of GOD that blows in the creative act, causes a genuine newness that no-one can constrict, counter, or control. In the act of repentance and baptism, we renounce false sources of life. We break with false definitions of reality. When we meet the reigning of the Crucified ONE (v.36) it is *the Wind of GOD* blowing; creating; making new; and restoring life. The fruit of the Holy Spirit is the freedom for new life; the freedom from the old deadly ways; and the freedom of the power to heal and transform. Peter anticipates a break with the death-oriented world around him (v.40). The main characteristic of human society is that it distorts reality. The invitation to the baptism life in the Christian community calls for disengagement from inauthentic ways of living. Baptism isn't an escape from reality but the

3 Cf. *Lk.24:13-35*

4 See *Ac.2:32ff*

5 *Lk.3:11-14*

6 *Ac.1:5; 10:44-48; 11:16.*

7 Hannah Arendt once remarked that the most radical claim of the Christian Scriptures isn't resurrection but forgiveness. GOD's grace in the resurrection of Jesus allows us to forgive.

embracing of a new way of life. While Peter speaks about disengaging from the dominant society, his address invites astonishment, awe and delight that the truth of the resurrection allows another way of living in our world. It's a way of life that isn't defined, or controlled by, the brutal and deadly ways of life that tend to dominate in our society.

response: Psalm 23 : 1 – 6

[the divine shepherd]

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.(1)
 He makes me lie down in green pastures;
 He leads me beside still waters;(2) He restores my soul.
 He leads me in right paths, for His name's sake.(3)
 Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
 I fear no evil; for You are with me;
 Your rod and Your staff – they comfort me.(4)
 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
 You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.(5)
 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
 all the days of my life, and I shall dwell
 in the house of the LORD my whole life long.(6)*

The speaker reflects on the special relationship between sheep and shepherd. At moments of threat, good shepherds place themselves between the danger and the threatened ones. Sheep depend on nourishment, protection and direction. The cost of protecting them is abuse, intense suffering and finally, the shepherds' own life. The speaker expresses confidence and fearlessness under the LORD GOD's protection. GOD is a reliable shepherd (v.1) and a generous host at a banquet (v.5).

In the covenant tradition, its GOD who acts as host after guiding the people through their difficulties. *Shalom*, or *peace* (v.2) was GOD's great gift to the covenant people. The psalmist refuses to split life into '*spiritual*' and '*material*' categories. The LORD GOD satisfies every kind of need – the images of table and cup (v.5) guard against any spiritualising. They concern *real food* and *real drink* laid out. In Israelite memory, *the manna* was *the surprising bread of heaven*, which overcame the people's physical hunger.⁸

At that time, nobody lacked food. They may be threatened (v.4) but the speaker knows that the powerful solidarity of GOD overrides any threat. This memory presses the speaker towards trusting in GOD's companionship that transforms and comforts in times of such threats. The end of despair is access to the Temple, where life is newly ordered (v.6). It isn't the place, but the vitality of the relationship which transforms. The security provided by the Temple simply confirms the relationship. The speaker knows that evil and threat are still present

⁸ See Ex.16:16

in the world but they're not to be feared. Confidence in the holy ONE is the source of the new direction in their lives for those who live trustingly in GOD.

second reading: 1 Peter 2 : 20 – 25

[the example of Christ's suffering]

If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have GOD's approval.(20) For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.(21) "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth."(22) When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.(23) He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.(24) For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.(25)

The author adds to the sheep/shepherd imagery. The vulnerability of the Christian community in a hostile society means they are outsiders who suffer for their faithfulness: In a hostile society, the Christian community is often powerless, unfree and forced to live as outsiders. They suffer for being obedient to the gospel (vv.18-20) and that suffering is contrasted with suffering that is punishment for wrongdoing. Suffering, willingly embraced in faith and inevitable in a faithful life, evokes social hostility. It was the case in Jesus' own life, that he dared obedience to GOD. That obedience conflicted with established religious and civil authorities and caused his suffering (vv.22-23). He is an example to disciples whose call is to the same obedience.

Jesus suffered innocently as the Christian community must suffer (v.21). The Christian community in Asia Minor, innocent of wrong-doing, identify with the innocent suffering ONE, Jesus, whose sacrifice makes possible the return of those who have mindlessly wandered away from the protection of '*the shepherd and guardian of souls*'. Jesus' suffering mediates life to others, permitting others to lead a changed existence (v.24). Jesus is not only the model, but he is the Source of Power and Authority to heal. The last verse (v.25) provides a strong link to the gospel reading. In the situation in Asia Minor, there are no false shepherds but only, straying sheep, exposed and vulnerable. '*Faithful sheep*' acknowledge their rightful shepherd. They '*know his voice*' and submit to his protection.

gospel reading: John 10 : 1 – 10

[Jesus the good shepherd]

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.(1) The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.(2) The gate-keeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.(3) When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.(4)

They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers."(5) Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.(6) So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.(7) All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.(8) I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.(9) The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."(10)

Like the Psalm earlier, the passage from John reflects on the special relationship between sheep and shepherd. People in ancient times called their kings and political leaders *'shepherds'* or *'pastors'*. Ezekiel said of the Israelite leaders, that they are *'shepherds'* who; *'drink the milk; dress in the wool; and eat the fattest sheep'*.⁹ The sheep are scattered and lost. The prophet added that the sheep will be taken from the leaders' mouths and the LORD will become their shepherd (vv.11-12) and gather them together. *'Flock'* at that time, meant people. Jesus seems to be continuing the same sort of attack that Ezekiel had made on the Israelite leaders. The door, or gate (v.1) is a kind of check-point. Those who ignore the gate and join the sheepfold in some other way, are frauds, or guides who must be treated with suspicion. They pose a danger to the flock. Entry through the proper gate, threatens the Israelite establishment, not so much because they're not watchful, but because they are thieves and bandits. They don't approach the people the proper way.

When Jesus told this parable, his listeners failed to understand, so he spoke again (vv.7-9). The Pharisees claim to be THE WAY to GOD. Jesus accuses them of using their position for their own advantage. He calls them, thieves and brigands. When the Israelites wanted to be like the other nations and have kings, GOD, speaking through the prophet Samuel, tells them that a king will, *"make their sons drive his wagons and cultivate his fields, and will make their daughters, hairdressers, cooks, and bakers, and will take away from them their vineyards and olive orchards, to give them to his own officials"*.¹⁰ But the Israelites insisted on being like the other nations. They had their kings – and it happened just as Samuel predicted. There was the example of David, who took Uriah's wife and ordered Uriah slain. There was Solomon, who had a thousand wives. Every king is a thief and a brigand. But a good leader or good shepherd acts differently. Such a person is more like a trustworthy guide (v.10).

⁹ Cf. *Ezk.34:3-4*

¹⁰ 1 S. 8:10-17

for sharing:¹¹

- *Peter addresses the crowd in Jerusalem. Comment on **Acts 2 : 14a, 36 – 41***
- *The example of Christ's suffering. Comment on **1 Peter 2 : 20 – 25***
- *Jesus the Good Shepherd. Comment on **Ezekiel 34 and John 10 : 1 – 10***

prayer:¹²

*O GOD, you never cease to call even those far away,
for it is your will that all be drawn into one fold.
Attune our ears to the voice of the Good Shepherd,
who leads us always to you, that we may find
under your tender protection life in all its fullness.
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:¹³

To respond to the call to change our style of living as Peter challenged the audience in Jerusalem to do and as the Christians in Asia Minor found to their discomfort, means learning about the costs. Those who want to live trustingly are often made to feel they are a minority group doing something on the periphery of society. Ridicule, harassment, fear, bitterness and discouragement, all make a strong case for simply walking away from the call.

The essence of GOD's nature and purpose as revealed by Jesus, is to identify with the weak. For this reason we have to identify with victims. Prayer, information and

11 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'*

12 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.

13 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.

analysis are important. But they're no substitute for personal involvement with people on the receiving end of injustice. For most of us that means seeking ways to be alongside and available in some lively way. It means an openness to being taught by the victims of injustice. It means we are receivers of gifts, rather than assuming we are bearers of gifts.

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