

EASTER 4 – 2021

Acts 4:8-12

1 Jn 3:1-2

Jn 10:11-18

Today is known as Good Shepherd Sunday because the gospel reading identifies Jesus as the Good Shepherd. In the Old Testament the word 'shepherd' means ruler not just a keeper of sheep., Moses is described in this way (Isaiah 63:11), but it was David who was seen as Shepherd king, the ideal ruler who was willing to risk his life for God's sheep, which of course only referred to the Children of Israel. Later in the time of the prophet Ezekiel the idea that God himself would be Israel's Shepherd-Ruler became cemented into people's thinking. The 'good' shepherd is contrasted to the 'wicked shepherd', those rulers who the prophets denounced because they did not protect or nurture God's people.

In our gospel reading, St John points to Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel's hope and as the Good Shepherd. He is contrasted with the wicked rulers who were the Romans and their puppets, the High Priests and the kings of the Herodian dynasty. Jesus the Good Shepherd is the servant leader who gives up his life for God's sheep, not as an involuntary martyr, but willingly and freely as an offering. St John never describes Jesus as the new David because Jesus is Shepherd of the Gentiles as well as the Jews. As the Father acknowledges and knows the Son, Jesus knows that knowing the Father includes abandoning himself to his Father's will, whatever that might require. It also means that Jesus knows God's sheep, not in the way that a student of agriculture knows about sheep. Jesus knows the character of each of God's sheep and calls them by name. In turn, the sheep have learned to trust him. They know that if they follow his voice he will lead them to pasture and to the sheepfold at night.

In John's gospel Jesus is the shepherd of both Jews and Gentiles among whom there was a remnant who trust and obey his voice. Jesus did not come to form two churches, there is one Church and one Shepherd under whom the apostles and their successors are under-shepherds namely the bishops, who oversee part of God's household and flock.

Today's first reading describes Peter's response to questions about on whose authority he healed a lame beggar and proclaimed about the resurrection of Jesus. Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of witness. He responded to his Jewish interrogators that God raised Jesus, the one that they had crucified and the healing was performed in Jesus' name. This Jesus he said, had fulfilled the prophecy of the psalmist that "The same stone which the builders refused is become the head-stone in the corner" (Ps 118:22). Jesus, the rejected one is Lord of all God's people, both Jews and Gentiles. "This is the Lord's doing and it is marvellous in our eyes. This is the day which the Lord hath made : we will rejoice and be glad in it," the psalmist continues.

It is only through obedience and trust in Jesus that salvation can be achieved. St John's first epistle assures us that those who listen to and obey the voice of Jesus the Good Shepherd have entered into a privileged relationship with God as his adopted children. We don't

deserve that privilege, but God has chosen to enter into a new covenant with his Church, the new people of God. This relationship includes our need to lay aside our natural tendency to live as though 'it's all about me,' and be faithful, active, self-giving children of God who are prepared to take risks in order to invite others to 'come and see' so they can be led to Jesus and come to know him as their loving Shepherd.

Bishop Stephen Verney said that he once saw a Lebanese shepherd bringing his flock to water with the leaders of the flock, two male sheep, acting the role which a sheep dog plays in Australia. The shepherd called these two sheep by name. They paraded up and down in front of the flock, keeping them back until the shepherd gave the word, and then led them to the spring of flowing water.

We might still be sheep, but we can lead others to come to know and obey their Good Shepherd.

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