

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Fourth Sunday of Easter 2 May 2020



Collect

Almighty ever-living God,
lead us to a share in the joys of heaven,
so that the humble flock may reach
where the brave Shepherd has gone before.
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

The fourth Sunday of Easter is known as “Good Shepherd Sunday” because every year the gospel reading is on this theme. It is taken from one part or another of Jesus’ discourse in chapter 10 of John’s gospel. In Year A the theme is also found in the responsorial psalm and the second reading. Every image of Jesus offers insight into the inexhaustible mystery of his person. The word of God provides us with such a wealth of images that sometimes they seem to collide with one another. In Eastertide, for example, Jesus is both lamb and shepherd. Only last week the author of 1 Peter wrote of Jesus as a lamb whose blood had won our salvation; in today’s passage he describes Jesus as “the shepherd and guardian of our souls.” This play of images is meant to inspire, not confuse, us. They allow us to inhabit the mystery and find our home in it.

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles

2:14, 36–41

On the day of Pentecost Peter stood up with the eleven and addressed the crowd with a loud voice: 'The whole House of Israel can be certain that God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ.'

Hearing this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the apostles, 'What must we do, brothers?' 'You must repent,' Peter answered 'and every one of you must be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise that was made is for you and your children, and for all those who are far away, for all those whom the Lord our God will call to himself.' He spoke to them for a long time using many arguments, and he urged them, 'Save yourselves from this perverse generation.' They were convinced by his arguments, and they accepted what he said and were baptised. That very day about three thousand were added to their number.

Responsorial Psalm

R. The Lord is my shepherd;
there is nothing I shall want.

or

R. Alleluia.

The Lord is my shepherd;
there is nothing I shall want.

Fresh and green are the pastures
where he gives me repose.

Near restful waters he leads me,
to revive my drooping spirit. R.

He guides me along the right path;
he is true to his name.

If I should walk in the valley of darkness
no evil would I fear.

You are there with your crook and your staff;
with these you give me comfort. R.

You have prepared a banquet for me
in the sight of my foes.

My head you have anointed with oil;
my cup is overflowing. R.

Surely goodness and kindness shall follow me
all the days of my life.

In the Lord's own house shall I dwell
for ever and ever. R.

First Reading

After a repeat of the introductory verse from last Sunday's reading, today's reading from Acts tells us what happened as a consequence of Peter's Pentecost address. Peter brings his speech to a forthright conclusion: "The whole House of Israel can be certain that God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ". So persuasive was Peter's preaching that many – "about three thousand" accepted his arguments and asked to be baptised.

The success of this inaugural sermon needs to be seen in the context of the whole book of Acts. From start to finish it is a success story. Whatever setbacks are experienced along the way, the spread of the gospel proceeds unfailingly according to God's plan and under the impetus of the Holy Spirit. Luke's purpose is to provide written testimony to this work of God. This explains why he idealises events and experiences such as Peter's preaching on Pentecost day.

The tone of the reading, therefore, is one of certain conviction. There is an energy about the story that should be easy enough for the reader to communicate. As it alternates between action and animated dialogue the sense of urgency is palpable. Even though the story is both ancient and artificial it still throws down the gauntlet to us today. What is our response to the good news?

Responsorial Psalm

The psalm for today is the same as the one we prayed on the 4th Sunday of Lent, Psalm 22/23. Today's context is very different. Now we are celebrating the victory of Christ over death. He is the shepherd who has himself gone through "the valley of darkness" and "prepared a banquet" for us; with him we shall dwell "in the Lord's own house . . . for ever and ever". There is every reason for us to rejoice.

All the same it is worth repeating what was said about the psalm back in Lent. The challenge for readers, apart from dealing with verses of different lengths, is to proclaim the all-too-familiar words as if they had just been discovered. They need to bring a firm freshness to the text and avoid any hint of sentimentality. The images are strong and plentiful: shepherding, green pastures, restful waters, the valley of darkness, a banquet, the Lord's own house. One after the other they build up a heart-warming sense of God's personal and protective love. This should be a joy to read.

A reading from the first letter of St Peter
2:20–25

The merit, in the sight of God, is in bearing punishment patiently when you are punished after doing your duty.

This, in fact, is what you were called to do, because Christ suffered for you and left an example for you to follow the way he took. He had not done anything wrong, and there had been no perjury in his mouth. He was insulted and did not retaliate with insults; when he was tortured he made no threats but he put his trust in the righteous judge. He was bearing our faults in his own body on the cross, so that we might die to our faults and live for holiness; through his wounds you have been healed. You had gone astray like sheep but now you have come back to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

A reading from the holy Gospel
according to John **10:1–10**

Jesus said: 'I tell you most solemnly, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold through the gate, but gets in some other way is a thief and brigand. The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the flock; the gatekeeper lets him in, the sheep hear his voice, one by one he calls his own sheep and leads them out. When he has brought out his flock, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow because they know his voice. They never follow a stranger but run away from him: they do not recognise the voice of strangers.'

Jesus told them this parable but they failed to understand what he meant by telling it to them.

So Jesus spoke to them again:

'I tell you most solemnly,
I am the gate of the sheepfold.
All others who have come
are thieves and brigands;
but the sheep took no notice of them.
I am the gate.
Anyone who enters through me will be safe:
he will go freely in and out
and be sure of finding pasture.
The thief comes
only to steal and kill and destroy.
I have come
so that they may have life
and have it to the full.'

Second Reading

The second reading today begins with an admonition which some may find disconcerting. It advises patience in enduring punishment that is unjust. Readers who are curious enough to turn to their Bibles for more information may be even more disturbed. They will find that these words are addressed to slaves.

The letter counsels slaves to accept even harsh treatment from their masters, seemingly in the hope that this will bear Christian witness to them. The author goes even further, claiming God's approval for slaves who submitted to punishment that was inflicted on them because of their Christian faith. The early Christian community did not directly challenge the social institution of slavery; to do so would have incurred the wrath of imperial Rome. For better or for worse, prudence dictated accommodation to the status quo.

The example of Christ is invoked to justify the advice given to slaves. In verses that recall the figure of the suffering servant in the prophet Isaiah, the author highlights Jesus' refusal to resort to violence. This short summary is in full accord with the gospel accounts of Jesus' passion; he did not resist the suffering unjustly meted out to him. Readers would be best to proclaim this text with empathy and pathos. Lovers of Handel's *Messiah* will recognise familiar words.

Gospel

In Year A we hear the first section of chapter 10 of John's gospel. Later sections are used in other years. While today's passage does not use the term "good shepherd", Jesus does present himself as a shepherd who knows his sheep by name and is known and trusted by them.

Along with the image of shepherd Jesus also speaks of himself as the gate of the sheepfold. These are not conflicting or mutually exclusive images. They complement one another to give a fuller picture of the endlessly fascinating figure that Jesus is.

Both images reflect shepherding practice in the Palestine of Jesus' day. Flocks were small, conditions were harsh, and the survival of the sheep depended on the personal devotion of the shepherd to his task. Jesus' audience would have readily identified the implicit reference to the true and false shepherds of the people of Israel (as portrayed, for example, in Ezekiel 34 – a text well worth reading).

For many people the final verse of this reading is a precious gem that crystallises the whole gospel: "I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full".

Concluding Prayers

Almighty and all-merciful God,
lover of the human race, healer of all our wounds,
in whom there is no shadow of death,
save us in this time of crisis;
grant wisdom and courage to our leaders;
watch over all medical people
as they tend the sick and work for a cure;
stir in us a sense of solidarity beyond all isolation;
if our doors are closed, let our hearts be open.
By the power of your love destroy the virus of fear,
that hope may never die
and the light of Easter, the triumph of life,
may shine upon us and the whole world.
Through Jesus Christ, the Lord risen from the dead,
who lives and reigns for ever and ever.
Amen.

Holy Mary, health of the sick, pray for us.
St Joseph, guardian of us all, pray for us.

(Most Rev. Mark Coleridge, Archbishop of Brisbane)

or

Gracious God,
We give thanks anew for your providence and presence.
We prayerfully seek your grace, amidst COVID-19 here and overseas.
We pray for those in need of healing.
We pray for your peace with those who are anxious or grieving.
We pray you will continue to strengthen and sustain
all those who are serving in response.
We pray for your Holy Spirit's discernment
amidst the many choices and decisions
facing our national, community and medical leaders.
We pray we each might see quickly what more we can do
to help those who are vulnerable.
This prayer for our nation in the family of nations,
with all that is on our hearts,
we gather now and pray
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

(Ecumenical prayer from the National Council of Churches. We have been invited to pray this prayer at 7pm each day.)