

JESUS THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Acts 4. 5-12
1 John 3. 16-24
John 10. 11-18

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

This Fourth Sunday of Easter is called ‘Good Shepherd Sunday’ because of the references each year from St John’s gospel, where our Lord refers to himself as the good shepherd and to his people as his sheep. The Post-Communion Prayer, which I will say or sing at the conclusion of the Eucharist, also refers to Jesus as the good shepherd of God’s people. I wonder, why is this theme appointed in the season of the Resurrection, three weeks after Easter?

In today’s gospel, Christ says he is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. By contrast, those who claimed the title of shepherd, our Lord says, are hirelings, hired hands who flee when the wolf comes to scatter the sheep. Jesus, by laying down his life, confronts the wolf in order to defend his sheep; and he says an extraordinary thing concerning this laying down of his life. He says that the Father loves him, because he lays down his life in order to take it up again. No one takes the shepherd’s life from him; he lays it down of his 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.’

The great act of shepherding of Christ consists of his willingness to go to the cross, to die on behalf of his sheep, that is, his people. When our Lord says, ‘It is finished’, his last words on the cross, he is referring to the accomplishment of the good shepherd as he lays down his life for his sheep. This is a dramatic development of an ancient theme in Holy Scripture. One of the most meaningful verses in the twenty-third psalm is the verse that states, ‘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.’ The twenty-third Psalm was written nearly a millennium before Jesus’s time; and yet Christ gives it a meaning deeper than could have been imagined by King David himself. Our Lord, God’s eternal Son, the good shepherd, has himself gone through the valley of the shadow of death in our human nature. He has confronted the wolf. He has died our death, and on the third day he rose again from the dead. He has passed through death on our behalf. He feeds us with that very body and blood which he took through death’s valley into glory. We need not fear.

St Peter famously feared. When Jesus came face to face with death, Peter denied him three times. It was in the courtyard of the high priest Caiaphas, who was trying and condemning Christ for calling God his own Father; for making himself equal with God. Three times out in that courtyard, Peter was identified as one of our Lord’s disciples. Three times, Peter denied knowing Jesus. But look at Peter today, in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. There he is, standing before Caiaphas and company, on trial for healing a crippled man; and he says that the healing is nothing other than by the power of the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. He indicts his accusers, before whom he had cowered in fear, with rejecting the Lord, and then boldly offers them salvation through the name of Jesus Christ.

Peter, together with the other witnesses of Christ’s death and resurrection, has been transformed. He is a different person. He is no longer a hireling who flees at the coming of the wolf. He himself has become a shepherd after the pattern of our Lord. He gives his own life to the calling. It is not that that Peter has taken his Saviour’s place. It is that Peter, who himself was forgiven, cleansed and transformed by Jesus’s sacrifice and victory over death, is now filled with the Spirit to proclaim Christ to fellow sinners; and to offer them redemption in the same terms which changed him. How did this change happen?

At the very end of St John's gospel, in an appearance by the Sea of Galilee, the risen Lord appears, this time to restore Peter. They were in the same place where Jesus had first given Simon a new name, Peter, which means Rock. Peter and John and others had been fishing all night and had caught nothing. Christ told them to fish again, to cast the net off the right side of the boat, and, as Peter obeyed him, they caught a great number of fish. They ate some of the fish with our Lord for breakfast. Afterward, Jesus began to question Peter about his love and loyalty. Three times Christ asked him, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' It hurt Peter to be asked that question three times. Each time Peter declared that he loved our Lord, he said, 'Feed, or tend, my sheep.' Then Jesus told Peter about the death that he would die for his name.

Peter was restored, not only as a disciple and follower of Christ, but also as an apostle, which means that he was sent to be a shepherd by the command of the good shepherd himself. That apostolic shepherding by Peter is what we see at work with such courage and boldness in the Acts of the Apostles. Today's readings shed light on each other. Our Lord shows that he is the good shepherd of his sheep by passing through the valley of the shadow of death and by rising from death on the third day. Peter, preaching this good news to a crippled man and healing him, shows the power of the good shepherd at work in the ministry of the Church.

This ministry is still unfolding. We live in the time after Jesus's resurrection, and after the descent of the Holy Spirit with power upon the disciples. All through Eastertide, we will hear readings from St John and from the Acts of the Apostles. They showcase the victory of Christ as the good shepherd of all God's people and in the work of the Church. There is a sense in which the Acts of the Apostles is a book which implies that chapters are still being written in the life of Christ's people. Some of those chapters are still being written now, as people come to know the power of the name of Jesus Christ and to receive the blessing of that power into their

lives. When this happens, we realise again that we are indeed the Lord's people and the sheep of his pasture.

Today, you and I are invited afresh to see and understand that our Lord the good shepherd has sacrificed himself for us; that our Lord the good shepherd knows us and cares for us; that our Lord the good shepherd invites us to listen to his voice, which constantly calls us and invites us to step into the fulness of life that he offers. And in that wonderful life that he offers, he will lead us to reach out in power and minister to others.

Amen.