

Readings for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

21st April 2024

First Reading: Acts 4:5-12

The Jewish rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

Second Reading: 1 John 3:16-24

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

Gospel: St John 10:11-18

Jesus said to the Pharisees: 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away – and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my 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.'

A Reflection for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

Today, the fourth Sunday after Easter, is often referred to as 'Good Shepherd Sunday' because our Gospel reading on this day is always part of John, chapter 10 – not the same reading each year, but part of this chapter, in which the evangelist writes about the shepherd and the sheep.

Whilst life in first century Judea was very different to our lives today, shepherding is still a job that is recognisable, even if it is done differently nowadays with quad bikes and dogs, at least in this part of the world. It is a role that involves caring for the flock, it is hard work, often in poor weather, and with its disappointments as well as its joys. We are reminded of that at this time of year as we start to see new lambs in the fields and talk is of lambing snows.

In today's Gospel, Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd. His point of comparison is not a bad shepherd, but simply a not very good shepherd, the hired hand, who does the basics but is not committed, and is off when things start to get tricky, when the wolf appears on the horizon. We have probably all come across people like that, not very committed; and we've probably all been that person at times too, in certain circumstances. In comparison, the good shepherd knows the sheep and really cares, to the extent of being prepared to lay down his life for them.

If a sheep farm, or any other organisation, is to be successful, it needs those involved to be committed, to care, to 'buy in' to the ideas that underpin it. In business, staff who are committed to their work, who are fully engaged, and who feel that the owners or managers are committed to them and their well-being, are generally more productive and have greater job satisfaction; and they also produce a better product or service for the customers.

The business model is easy for us to understand, partly because many of us have experienced it, but it is not a great analogy for the church as the followers of Jesus. Whilst we need enough money to sustain ourselves, profit is not our motive and success is not measured in numbers, even though the church has collected statistics on attendance, baptisms, weddings and funerals for many, many years. Small congregations can be thriving places where members are actively striving to deepen their faith and share the love of God in the way they serve the world around them. Christian communities thrive where all are committed to the well-being of one another, where all care, and, in turn, that helps each of us to feel valued and good about ourselves.

Jesus, the good shepherd, exemplified that. He was totally committed to the role given to him by God the Father, totally committed to the well-being of his disciples gathered around him, to developing their understanding of the holy scriptures and his mission as Messiah, and totally committed to serving the populations of the towns and villages they travelled through. They are all his sheep.

But, although this Gospel passage appears to focus on Jesus, it also turns the focus on us indirectly. Just as a good shepherd's attention is on the sheep rather than him or herself, so Jesus focusses his attention on his sheep, on us. All of us. We are the most enormous flock of the living and departed, and yet we are all known and cared for individually and intimately. Jesus says: 'I know my own and my own know me.' And part of our role as members of the flock is simply to accept the boundless grace and love that Jesus offers to each of us. Grace and love so deep that Jesus was prepared to lay down his life for us.

Accepting this grace and love means accepting Jesus as the foundation of our lives. In the passage from Acts, Peter, quoting from Psalm 118, describes Jesus as the 'cornerstone'. In my dictionary, a cornerstone is described as a foundation stone or an indispensable part of something. The word translated as 'cornerstone' could also be

translated as 'keystone' – the central stone at the top of an arch that keeps the whole thing together. Whichever word we prefer, we get the idea: Jesus is to be indispensable to our lives, someone who gives strength and stability to every part of our lives.

This passage from Acts comes shortly after that from last week. Peter and John had healed a paralysed man at the gate of the Temple and Peter had explained to the crowd that they had only be able to do so in the name of Jesus. That Peter was teaching the people and proclaiming resurrection in Jesus had annoyed the Temple leaders and so they had Peter and John arrested. Today's reading is set the next morning when they are asked to explain themselves.

It is encouraging to us to note that, when Peter was in a difficult situation and needing to find the right words, he was filled with the Holy Spirit. And he used the healing of the paralysed man as a symbol of the salvation that is available to all people through Jesus Christ. Salvation here is to be understood in its broadest sense, encompassing physical and spiritual healing, deliverance from life-threatening situations, and salvation to eternal life.

As ever, we have to be careful how we interpret the text, remembering the context of the original delivery, and also the context provided by what we know from other scriptures. Where Peter says 'There is salvation in no-one else...' this refers to the particular act of Jesus laying down his life and is not a statement that there is only one way to God. We have a better understanding of that when we look at this statement in the context of today's Gospel where Jesus says: 'I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold – I must bring them also and they will listen to my voice.'

Accepting God's grace and love for us and for the world, as shown by Jesus, the good shepherd, laying down his life for us, making Jesus the cornerstone or keystone of our lives, naturally leads us to how we live our lives. The reading from the first letter of John starts by affirming: 'We know love by this, that the Son of God laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.' God's love, manifest in Jesus, compels us to love one another. Laying down our lives starts with caring for one another and for those in need, building a community where all are welcome, all are loved, all are cared for.

As the passage from the first letter of John continues: 'How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love not in word or speech, but in truth and action.'

The fourth Sunday after Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday, is also known as Vocations Sunday. So, as we think of the love and care of Jesus the Good Shepherd, we should also think of our own calling, our own vocation. For we are all called to serve, both in the church and in the world beyond. Following Jesus' example of love and care, we each have a different role to play.