

4th Sunday in Easter

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 2:14A, 36-41
<i>Response</i>	The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 23:1-3A, 3B4, 5, 6
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Peter 2:20B-25
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I am the good shepherd, says the Lord; I know my sheep, and mine know me.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 10:1-10

On the Fourth Sunday of Easter, the Church begins to transition from the great feast of Easter and head toward Pentecost. So this Fourth Sunday is actually kind of a midpoint in the Easter season. What you see is, up until now, we've been focusing on the resurrection appearances of Christ when we look at the Gospels. But this Sunday is the beginning of the next several weeks of passages which are going to be taken from the Gospel of John in particular, focusing on the identity of Jesus as the shepherd and also on his last words to the disciples at the Last Supper in John's farewell discourse, where he promises them to send the spirit once he departs after his resurrection and ascension. With these Sunday readings, the Church is going to continue to journey through the book of Acts, but when it comes to the Gospels, She is going to go back to John and prepare us for the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. So today, Sunday is often called Good Shepherd Sunday and we are going to be looking at Jesus' famous allegory of the shepherd and the sheep from the Gospel of John 10. So let us begin with the Gospel and then we will go back and look at the Acts of the Apostles after we are done with this. So in John 10:1-10 the Gospel reads as follows:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber; but he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens; the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and

leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." This figure Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers; but the sheep did not heed them. I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.¹

Pause there. So obviously you can see that there is a lot going on with this particular passage. Let me just try to walk through it image by image and line by line and shed some light on it from its first century Jewish context. So the first thing I want to highlight here is that John refers to this teaching that Jesus is giving here as a *paroimia*. That is the Greek word; it means a figure of speech. It is very similar to what we see in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, where Jesus will give *parabole* — in other words parables. Because in the parables, Jesus compares one thing to another. Usually he's comparing something to the Kingdom of God. So he will say "the Kingdom of God is like X" or "the Kingdom of God is like Y" or "the Kingdom of God is like Z." So in this case Jesus is doing the same thing here. He's giving us a figure of speech that involves a comparison, but it is not called a parable — although you could maybe call it that...like the parable of the shepherd o the sheep or whatnot. So each of the images in this figure of speech — just like in the parables — is a comparison that is meant to have a particular meaning. So in order to understand it you have to understand what the images are.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

So if you look at it line by line there, first Jesus uses the image of a sheepfold. Now as far as we can tell, based on ancient sources and ancient writings, what Jesus is describing is a little stone enclosure that they would often have — sometimes in the middle of the village — where they could keep the sheep safely for the night. It would be a stone enclosure with one gate or one entryway into the sheepfold. So the shepherds could bring their sheep there for the night and they would lock the gate and then there would be a gatekeeper — he mentions him — who would watch over the sheep for the night so that thieves or strangers — as Jesus also mentions — wouldn't break in and steal the sheep. Sheep were a precious commodity in the ancient world. They were the lifeblood of ancient Israelite society and so thievery was something that would happen — you wouldn't want thieves to break in. And what Jesus is describing here though is that unlike the thief who would break in to steal and kill, the true shepherd is going to come and call his sheep to him. So he says that when he would go in the morning to collect his sheep he would “call out his own sheep by name” and then “lead them out of the sheepfold.” And what writers who have studied this have said — I don't know because I am not a shepherd, but this is what I'm told — is that this is in fact the. Shepherds will use particular voices. They will give particular names to the sheep so that they can call their own sheep. So that even if the sheep were mixed into a sheepfold with other sheep from other shepherds, that the particular sheep belonging to the true shepherd would know his voice and they would know their name. So he can go in and call their names and then they would come out and they would follow him out. So that's what Jesus is doing here in this figure of speech. He's basically giving a parable or a figure that is drawing on the common experience of shepherding in the first century A.D. in his society.

However, what it says here is that the audience doesn't really understand what he is talking about. They don't understand to what does this apply. “What is the meaning of this little story you are giving here?” So Jesus, also like in the other Gospels, has to explain it. He has to make explicit what the meaning of the parable is. So he goes on to say “Amen, Amen, I say to you, I am the door.” So he

compares himself here to the gate that leads into the sheepfold or that leads out as well. “I am the gate. I am the door. All who came before me are thieves and robbers; but the sheep didn't listen to them. I am the gate; if anyone enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.” So notice, that is the key right there. Jesus isn't talking about an ordinary shepherd or an ordinary sheepfold or an ordinary gate, he's talking about being saved. He's talking about eternal life, and he's comparing himself to the gate through which the sheep will go out in order to enter into the pastures, in order to find pasture. So the pastureland is a symbol for eternal life, the gate becomes a symbol for access to eternal life and Jesus is, in a sense, using a double metaphor here. He's both the authentic shepherd who is going to lead the sheep out to pasture, and he is the gate, he is the way of access to eternal life.

Now you might say, “why would he say something like this?” It is kind of strange to say that everyone who came before me were thieves and robbers, right? Well it is strange unless you know your Old Testament. Now in this case, because it's Easter, we don't have an Old Testament reading. However, I would encourage you in this instance to go back to the Old Testament. I just want to read you one Old Testament text because here Jesus, in John 10, is explicitly alluding to a prophecy about bad shepherds from the Old Testament. It's in the book of Ezekiel 34:2-6, so just listen to this for just a moment and you will get a sense of the background of why Jesus gives us this metaphor, this figure of speech. In the book of Ezekiel, the prophetess is prophesying against the wicked leaders of Israel, in particular the priests who have become corrupt. And he compares the priests to shepherds, he calls them shepherds, and this is what he says:

Thus says the Lord God: Ho, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and they

became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

Pause there. Now Jesus' allegory makes sense. What's he doing? When he says that "everyone who came before him was a thief", he's talking about the previous leaders of Israel. He is talking about the leaders of Jerusalem and he is saying that they were inauthentic shepherds, but he is going to be the authentic shepherd, a true shepherd who is going to care for the salvation of the sheep, who is going to lead them out into good pasture, into the pasture of eternal life. Now here's where the rub is with this particular image. For Jesus to refer to himself as the gate to eternal life and to even imply that he is the shepherd who is going to call the sheep out by name is a mysterious thing, because when you go back to the Old Testament, the same chapter from the book of Ezekiel, it uses the image of a shepherd not only to describe the future Messiah, but also to describe God himself. In other words, if you keep going in the book of Ezekiel 34, it says this in verse 11:

thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when some of his sheep have been scattered abroad, so will I seek out my sheep; and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness...

So what is going on here? Well basically, God here is saying that although the people of Israel have been scattered among the Gentile nations because of the wicked leaders of Israel at the time of the Prophet, one day he's going to come as shepherd and he's going to call out to the sheep. He is going to bring them together, he's going to gather them from the four corners and he is going to lead them to good pasture. He is going to lead them to green pastures. In other words, he is going to give them eternal life. So that's what Jesus is alluding to. He's taking the imagery from the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel and he's applying it to himself. He is both the true shepherd and he's also the gateway that's going to lead

them out to pasture and to eternal life. And notice what he says there, that God is going to rescue the sheep on a “day of clouds and thick darkness.” Well what day might that be? Well if you look at the Gospels, the day of clouds and thick darkness is the day of the crucifixion. It is the passion and the death of Jesus Christ. That is how he is going to save his sheep. So this is a mysterious passage. It's a bit of a difficult passage, but I think it shows you here that in the Gospel of John, Jesus is once again revealing that he is not just the Messiah, he's the divine son of God. He is God come in person to seek out the lost, to save the lost sheep of the house of Israel and to bring them into green pastures of eternal life. That's what the good Shepherd does.

Now with that in mind, let's go back and we will look at the Acts of the Apostles. So the other reading for this day is the reading from Acts 2. Once again, it's the homily of Peter on the feast of Pentecost. So on the third Sunday we looked at the first part of Peter's homily. Now on the fourth Sunday we are going to look at the second part of Peter's homily for Pentecost and the results of that homily. So it says this:

But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?"

Now pause here for just a second. If you were asking that question in a contemporary American context, like an American Christian context, and you had a crowd of people and you were preaching the gospel to them and you said “what must we do next?”, a lot of Christians in the United States — a lot of Protestant Christians — would say the next step would be “you accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior into your heart and you get saved.” But notice what Peter does.

He do something different. He does call them to repentance, but he calls them not just to repent but to the sacraments. Listen to what Peter says:

And Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him." And he testified with many other words and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

Wow! So what is important about this passage? Well at least three things. Number one. When the people hear Peter's homily and are cut to the heart, his response to them is repent and be baptized. In other words, he points them, as I just said, to the sacraments. Number two. Notice here that Peter considers Baptism not just to be a symbol, but to be what we would call a sacrament. It has the power to forgive sins. That's why he says here, "be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." That is what Baptism does. It washes away our sin. Third. Notice something else. Peter says that baptism is for them and for their children. This is very, very important here. Notice he doesn't say "this is for you and for your children if they have reached the age of reason and can choose it for themselves," which is again what many of our non-Catholic brothers and sisters believe about Baptism. You should only administer Baptism to children who are old enough to choose it for themselves. Peter makes no such statement. Peter says that Baptism is for every body. It is for you and for your children, and it is even for the Gentiles, it is for those who are far off. Because God's covenant love in the New Testament is not more exclusive than in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament you could be brought into the covenant as an infant through the right of circumcision.

Martin Luther even said this. In the New Covenant, would it make sense for God to exclude infants from the grace of salvation simply because they can't choose it

for themselves? By no means, because then that would make the old covenant more inclusive than the new covenant. So Peter's whole point is that Baptism is for everyone. It is for you and it is for your children. We will actually see this later on in the Acts of the Apostles. Acts 16 and Acts 13 both describe whole households receiving the sacrament of Baptism. Once the father comes to believe in Christ, the whole household is baptized. That means his wife, his children and even any servants or others who might be living with them in that home in the whole domestic household. Everyone receives the sacrament of Baptism. Everyone receives the grace of forgiveness. So I bring this up because it's one of those things that Catholics often get asked about. "Why do you practice infant baptism? Why do you baptize children?" Well because that's how the apostolic Church did it. That's what the Acts of the Apostles describes to us, that Christ who is the good shepherd is calling all of us to be his sheep, calling us to eternal life. And so that sacrament of Baptism, the gift of Baptism, is something that is for us and for our children.

Then fourth and finally, notice the effects of Peter's homily. After receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and then standing up to preach, giving them the good news, going through the basics of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension, and then calling them to repent of their sins and be baptized, 3000 people receive baptism that day. 3000 people convert. And as I mentioned before, I teach at a seminary and so I like to tell the men who are preparing for ordination, "this is Peter's first homily. And in his first homily he had 3000 conversions." So that is one really, really good first homily. So I like to tell the seminarians, don't get disappointed if you don't get 3000 conversions on your first homily, because this is an extraordinary moment. This is the first homily of the first apostle, the chief of the apostles, on the day of Pentecost. But it shows you here that it's not Peter's natural powers. It wasn't because he was such a great speaker that 3000 people converted. It was because he was filled with the fire of the Holy Spirit. This is a supernatural grace that's given to him through Pentecost and in his preaching.

So that's the Acts of the Apostles today, and in this case the Church does a beautiful job of stitching the Acts of the Apostles reading and the Gospel reading together here with the Responsorial Psalm, bridging them with the most famous Psalm of all. That is Psalm 23 and I am not going to read that to you because most people know this one by heart. I'll just highlight for you what the Psalm is about. Well it is about a shepherd. And in this case, who is the shepherd? Well he is the Lord himself, YHWH, the tetragrammaton, the holy name of God, the Lord, the God of Israel. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Notice what he does. It says that "he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me to still waters; he restores my soul." Now on the one hand, in its original context, you can see that this is a Psalm of David talking about the fact that God provides for him and cares for him. But once you bring it in to the new covenant, how does Jesus fulfill this? Well because he is not just the good Shepherd, but he is the Lord come in person. And he leads his sheep to the green pastures of eternal life. That's what the good shepherd does.

And if you have any doubts about that, you can actually just go to the teaching of the Church. Vatican II, Lumen Gentium paragraph 6, had this to say about the Church and Christ as sheepfold and Shepherd:

The Church is a sheepfold whose one and indispensable door is Christ. It is a flock of which God Himself foretold He would be the shepherd, and whose sheep, although ruled by human shepherds; are nevertheless continuously led and nourished by Christ Himself, the Good Shepherd and the Prince of the shepherds, who gave His life for the sheep.

This is a beautiful, beautiful passage from the Second Vatican Council on the image of the Church as a sheepfold and Christ as a shepherd. I would like to add one other point here. Pope Francis, early on in his pontificate, used the image of the good Shepherd and the sheep for his call to priests to be good shepherds to the people of God. And one of the things he said, a very famous image, is that the priest should "smell like the sheep." A priest needs to be someone who is not

separate and distant from his people, but he needs to be with them, he needs to be in the messiness, so to speak, of their lives as they are journeying toward the eternal promised land of heaven and everlasting life. So the Pope said that the priest should smell like the sheep. And I would like to add one point to that. If you think about John 10 and Jesus as the true shepherd, then the priest, who is striving to be an image of Christ the Shepherd, should not only smell like the sheep, he should also sound like the shepherd. Because what does the shepherd do? He calls the sheep by name and they hear his voice and they recognize his voice. So when the priest not only lives with his people and ministers to them, but also calls to his people, he wants to have the voice of Christ. He needs to use the words of Christ, the words of the Gospel, the teaching of the Church, so that he can develop and cultivate the voice of Christ so that when people hear his voice, they will hear Christ speaking to them as the true shepherd of the sheep, as the good Shepherd who ministers to them and who leads us all to the green pastures of eternal life.