

# The Fourth Sunday of Easter

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 2:14A, 36-41
<i>Response</i>	The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not 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; I know my own and my own know me
<i>Gospel</i>	John 10:1-10

The Fourth Sunday of Easter for Year A continues our journey through the beautiful letter of 1 Peter. And here we move into Chapter 2, verses 20 through 25. And this is what it says.:

For what credit is it, if when you do wrong and are beaten for it you take it patiently? But if when you do right and suffer for it you take it patiently, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.<sup>1</sup>

So much going on there. So let me try to put this in context. One of the things that 1 Peter is doing here is he's writing to people in the dispersion, presumably Jewish Christians, who are suffering in some way, shape, or form. And he's trying to help them understand their suffering and accept their suffering as members of the... well, he doesn't use the body of Christ, that's Paul, but as those who belong to

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

Christ and who imitate Christ. So he begins by saying, "Look, it's no credit to you if you suffer for doing wrong." There's lots of suffering in the world. Sometimes people suffer because they've done something wrong. Sin has negative consequences. So he says, "what credit is it, if when you do wrong and are beaten for it you take it patiently?" So suffering justly for something you've done wrong and with patience is no real mark of virtue. Rather, it's if you are doing what is right and you suffer for it and take it patiently, then you have God's approval. Because what's happening then is that you're suffering not justly, but unjustly, for something you haven't done. And yet you bear it with patience. So the virtue that he's inculcating here is *hypomenō*. Sometimes it'll be translated as patience or endurance, patient endurance, the willingness to endure some suffering for God's sake.

Now here's the kicker. 1 Peter 2:21 says:

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

Nowadays we all love to talk about vocations. Like, "What's my vocation?" Are you called to married life? Are you called to religious life? Are you called to priesthood? That's really beautiful and wonderful and good, but it's always important to remember that just as Paul talks about our fundamental vocation as being to baptism, so too 1 Peter, here Peter talks about a fundamental Christian call that everyone is called to, which is to suffer patiently in imitation of Christ. It's very clear. 1 Peter 2:21 says, "To this you have been called." What is the this there? Patient suffering even for something you haven't done. And if you have any doubts about it, you just look to Christ. "Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps."

So there we have a really crucial imagery. In Judaism, the language and the imagery of walking is the language of discipleship. So if you're going to walk in the footsteps of someone, you're going to imitate them, like the disciple will follow the path of the master. They'll imitate the life and actions of the master. And Peter's using similar language here to describe what will later go on to be called *The Imitation of Christ*. The classic work, Thomas à Kempis, in the 15th century, or

14th, I can't remember. Sorry, mea maxima culpa. But in the middle ages, Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*. That language of the imitation of Christ is being articulated here in 1 Peter 2, using Jewish imagery of walking, which is always the kind of constitutive biblical image for the moral life. Think of Psalm 1:

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers...

So he doesn't walk in the way, he doesn't imitate sinners and scoffers. He imitates the righteous. He follows the way of righteousness. That's the way that leads to life. Same thing here too in 1 Peter 2, Christ leaves us this example of patient suffering so that we should follow in His steps. And in order to ground this, it's fascinating here, that 1 Peter 2, he alludes to the Old Testament. What Old Testament passage does he allude to when he says:

no guile was found on his lips. When he was reviled...he suffered, he did not threaten...He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree...By his wounds you have been healed.

This is an allusion to the Suffering Servant. If you go back to Isaiah 52-53, it's a famous oracle of the Suffering Servant. I'm just going to read it to you and I want you to hear the echoes that are present in this passage from 1 Peter.

Isaiah 53:4 to 7 says this:

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows...  
But he was wounded for our transgressions,  
he was bruised for our iniquities;  
upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,  
and with his stripes we are healed.

That's the exact passage Peter's alluding to here. "By His wounds, you have been healed."

All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have turned every one to his own way;

and the Lord has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
yet he opened not his mouth;  
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb,  
so he opened not his mouth.

So here in 1 Peter, this is very important, we see not only a robust Christology, a theology of Christ as the Suffering Servant, we also see a robust theology of Christians as suffering servants, in the plural. In other words, those who belong to Christ should expect to suffer, and when suffering comes, they should ask for the grace to suffer patiently, as Christ Himself suffered, quietly like the Suffering Servant. Because Christ didn't just suffer this way in order to set us free from our sins, He suffered this way, as Peter says, "leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps." So the vocation to suffering, a very mysterious and powerful text, but one that we need to reflect upon, because the reality is, as I've said elsewhere, you can run from suffering, but you cannot hide from it. Suffering is going to find you. And when it's accepted with patience, it can actually become redemptive. Because suffering willingly accepted, can be changed by God's grace into love, into redemptive love. And Christ, of course, shows us that because it is precisely through the suffering on the cross that our wounds are healed.

One last point about the passage that's fascinating. Notice that it says:

For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.

This is one of those passages where the RSV misses a real opportunity. The word guardian here in English, in Greek is *episkopos*. We get the English word episcopal from that. And it means a bishop. the Greek, literally *episkopos* means overseer. So a bishop is an overseer. So in this passage, what Peter literally says is, "For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls." It is very important to realize that Christ is not only the high priest, as

He's described in the Book of Hebrews in particular, He's also the supreme bishop. He's literally called a bishop in 1 Peter 2. So just as priests participate in the priesthood of Christ, bishops participate in the episcopacy of Jesus, who is the *episkopos*, the overseer, the bishop of our souls, because as shepherds, He's leading us, God willing, to the heavenly promised land.

In closing, just in with one quote from the Catechism about suffering, since this passage is very much about the imitation of Christ in his suffering. In Paragraph 616 of the Catechism, it describes the suffering of Christ in these terms:

*It is love "to the end" that confers on Christ's sacrifice its value as redemption and reparation, as atonement and satisfaction. He knew and loved us all when he offered his life... No man, not even the holiest, was ever able to take on himself the sins of all men and offer himself as a sacrifice for all. The existence in Christ of the divine person of the Son, who at once surpasses and embraces all human persons, and constitutes himself as the Head of all mankind, makes possible his redemptive sacrifice for all.*

In other words, what makes the cross redemptive is not just the suffering that Jesus endures, but the love with which He endures it. It is love that transforms suffering into sacrifice, that is redemptive and takes away sin. So as we reflect on our own sufferings, and our own practice of the imitation of Christ, ask yourself, "How do I respond when I suffer? And how can I respond more like Christ Himself, the Suffering Servant, the "Shepherd and Bishop" of my soul?"