

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Acts 4:8-12; Psalm 118 (117); 1 John 3:1-2; John 10:11-18

I am the good shepherd

John 10:11 “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 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. 13 The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 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. 17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18 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.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This remarkably beautiful and well-known passage reflects a deep meditation on the meaning of Jesus’ life and death, a meditation that comes from the spiritual guide of the Johannine community, although based on authentic Jesus material.

KIND OF WRITING

This is a kind of (r)evolving meditation, very typical of the Fourth Gospel. In a graduated series, the writer invites us to a deeper insight into the love of God shown through the care of Jesus for the flock.

Part I: *Jesus contrasts himself with others* (vv. 1-5)

Narrator reports the listeners’ incomprehension (v. 6)

Part II: *Jesus as the sheep gate and as the good shepherd* (vv. 7-18)

Amen, Amen, I say to you:

I am the gate of the sheep. (v. 7)

I am the good shepherd (vv. 11-13)

I am the good shepherd (vv. 14-16)

The Father loves me (vv. 17-18)
Narrator describes the listeners’ divided reaction (vv. 19-21)

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

In the ancient Near East, the metaphor of shepherd for the ruler was a natural one. God was also a kind of king and so also a shepherd. This is found positively and negatively throughout the Bible, from the book of Genesis onwards.

“A Psalm of David. The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake. 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. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.” (Psalms 23:1-6; see also Ps 28:9; 49:14; 78:71; 80:1)

He blessed Joseph, and said, “The God before whom my ancestors Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day.”



Thought for the day

The image of the Good Shepherd is profoundly reassuring. We hear it today in John’s gospel and elsewhere in the Bible. It evokes a tremendous feeling of being cared for—the consolation of faith. Even in these difficult days, we need such reassurance. At the same time, the metaphor is used in a dissonant way: no regular shepherd, however caring, gives his life for his sheep! Cosy familiarity can dull the sense of shock: what is going on here? The gentle pastoral language suddenly gives way to sacrifice, as the shepherd *becomes the lamb of God*.

Prayer

Jesus our shepherd, we know your care for us was costly as you laid down your life and took it up again. Help us to know again “the great events that gave us new life” in you, that we may hear you and follow you in all we do.

(Genesis 48:15)

As I live, says the Lord GOD, because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, since there was no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep.” (Ezekiel 34:8)

“I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.” (Ezekiel 34:23)

“My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes.” (Ezekiel 37:24)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Shepherd language is present throughout the Gospels, as a metaphor for the ministry of Jesus and for exploring his death.

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were

harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (Matthew 9:36)

What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? (Matthew 18:12)

“Then Jesus said to them, “You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’” (Matthew 26:31)

It looks very much as if this meditation is an expansion of the parable of the lost sheep. It is typical of this Evangelist to develop conservatively—the innovative reflections nearly always have roots in material going back to the historical Jesus.

ST PAUL

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6-9)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 11 A thematic sentence opens the meditation. The I am sentences of this Gospel reveal a deep insight into the identity of Jesus, applying to Jesus the name of God from Exodus 3:14. Notice that real shepherds, however attached to their flock, never “lay down their lives” for the sheep!

Verse 12 This is to contrast with the good shepherd. The first contrast is external and we see what the “hired hand” does. Reflecting Ezek 34, the writer acknowledges that not all shepherds are shepherds.

Verse 13 This contrast presents the inner life of the hired hand, who lacks “care for the sheep”.

Verse 14 The thematic statement is repeated. “Know” here means a great deal more than being informed: it is an intimate, loving mutuality, which sustains the sheep and motivates the shepherd.

Verse 15 “Just as” sentences have a special force in this Gospel: the loving “knowledge” between the Father and the Son is not only a kind of parallel to the loving knowledge between Jesus and believers. Rather, the self-same love is



actualised in both. Then follows a mention of laying down his life, which takes up v.11 and looks forward to vv.17-18.

Verse 16 This is an acknowledgement that some do not recognise Jesus. We think automatically of “other churches” but most likely what is meant here is Jews who have not come to Jesus. The long-term vision is communion, one family in the faith.

Verse 17 Vv.17 and 18 belong together as unit. Shepherding language is suspended and we are left with a more existential articulation of the Jesus’ death and resurrection. Because he is the resurrection and the life (ch. 11) Jesus has power to lay it down and to take it up again.

Verse 18 The death of Jesus was a choice. Historically, this is certainly so; however, the Fourth Gospel, keen to display the love of God in Jesus, underlines the radical freedom of Jesus as he gives himself for love of us.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. There is a qualitative difference between a casual acquaintance and a relationship characterised by understanding and care. What changes have you experienced in your relationships as your love and knowledge of the other increased? What was it like for you to experience that change?

2. The good shepherd “lays down his life for the sheep”. When has your care for another led you to “lay down your life” for that person, e.g., as a friend, parent, spouse, son or daughter? When

you have known another to do this for you?

3. The parable also suggests that relationships should not be closed but open. Perhaps you have experienced the truth of the saying that love shared is love strengthened.

4. Jesus speaks of the freedom of the Good Shepherd in laying down his life. Faced with the needs of others, we can at times feel trapped into looking after them, caught by duty, obligation, or guilt. We can become like the hired hands who do a job without care for the person. Perhaps you have experienced both attitudes, caring for others under duress and by free choice. What difference did it make when you chose to care for the other, even in circumstances where you had little option?

5. What do these experiences of love and care in human relationships reveal to you about God’s love for you?

PRAYER

God of lasting love, fulfil your plan of salvation to gather into one fold the peoples of the whole world.

Let everyone on earth recognise your Christ as the Good Shepherd who freely lays down his life for all to take it up again in power.

Grant this through Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit God for ever and ever. Amen.

Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom God raised from the dead

Acts 4:8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, 9 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, 10 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. 11 This Jesus is ‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.’

12 There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The speech of Peter continues his account of the healing of the man at the Beautiful Gate. It comes after the drama of the arrest of the witnesses:

While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. (Acts 4:1–4)

It is a classic piece of Lucan writing (Holy Spirit; the Paschal Mystery; the citation of a psalm; the witness to and offer of salvation). Perhaps today v.12 offers special difficulties as we try to balance the uniqueness of the Christ event with our awareness that the Spirit of God is found in other faiths as well.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The challenge in early Christian proclamation is continuity (with the previous dispensation) and discontinuity (in Jesus). To affirm continuity — really the faithfulness of God — arguments are grounded in Scripture. Discontinuity is evident in the offer of salvation firstly through the cross and resurrection and secondly to all of humanity.

KIND OF WRITING

This is a second, shorter speech and it is offered in its integrity by the lectionary. The speech has a simple shape:

Introduction: 8b-9 address

Thesis: 10 full identification of Jesus

Proof: 11 argument for the Scriptures

Conclusion: 12 generalised conclusion and implied appeal.

From the point of view of the content, the speech falls really into two parts, after the address in 8a:

(1) the first focusing on how the healing happened (vv. 8b-10);

(2) the second dealing with what the healing means (vv. 11-12).

RELATED PASSAGES

The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So John summoned two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” When the men had come to him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’” Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.” (Luke 7:18–23)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 8 There are two reactions to Jesus: that of the people and that of the authorities. Peter is filled with the Spirit (hugely important, as is well known, in Luke-Acts: Luke 1:15, 17, 35, 41, 47, 67, 80; 2:25–27; 3:16, 22; 4:1, 14, 18, 33, 36; etc. Acts 1:2, 5, 8, 16; 2:4, 17–18, 33, 38; 4:8, 25, 31; etc. Peter is the spokesman until; 12:17.

Verse 9 The “case” against the apostles is repeated. Peter shows real courage here in contrast to his earlier behaviour (Lk 22:54-62). There is a strong irony in being questioned for a good deed—a kind of minor echo of the reaction to Jesus for all his good work.

Verse 10 Peter expands the address to include all of Israel. Jesus of Nazareth is identified as the Christ. His death at the hands of the rulers was followed by his

resurrection by God. Of course it was the Romans who actually did the crucifying, but, Luke pins the moral responsibility on the Jewish leadership. Health here carries two meanings: physical well-being and eternal salvation.

Verse 11 This psalm was indeed widely used, as we see from Matt 21:42 || Mark 12:10 || Luke 20:17 (where Jesus himself cites the psalm); 1 Pet 2:7; Barnabas 6:4. Thus God rejects (and reverses) the inadequate estimation of Jesus implied in his rejection. Peter is a Jew talking to fellow Jews, but identifying Jesus as the true heir to the promises.

Verse 12 This exclusivist claim is common in early Christianity. Q (Matt 10:32-33 || Luke 12:8-9), Paul (Rom 3:30; 9:30-33), Mark (8:38), Hebrews (10:9-10), the Deutero-Pauline tradition (1 Tim 2:5), the Fourth Gospel (John 14:6), and 1 John (2:23). Cf. outside the canon: Ignatius, Philadelphians 9:1 (“he is himself the door to the Father, through which Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and the prophets and the apostles and the church enter”) and Hermas, Vision 4.2.4 and Parable 9.12.5 (“a man cannot enter the kingdom of God in any other way than through the name of his Son”). For ourselves today, two observations may help. (i) Christianity, for Christians, is not understood as only one way among many. (ii) At the same time, we are not taught that only full paid up Christians are acceptable to God.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The courage of Peter is remarkable and a measure of the change he underwent. Can I identify a time in my own life when I likewise changes and grew in courage to bear witness?
2. According to Ps 118, God reverses human expectations. In my own experience, have I been obliged ever to reverse some important way of looking at things and been led to a deeper insight?
3. Salvation—the root metaphor is healing—brings life and refreshment. How have I myself experienced such gifts precisely as believer?

PRAYER

God of salvation, your raised up Jesus the pioneer of our salvation, that we might experience your healing touch.

In him lies our well-being, in him lies all our joy. The gift is great and so is the call: let us be witness to the Messiah by all we are and have and do.

We will be like him, for we will see him as he is

1 John 3:1 See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2 Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This is surely one of the most familiar and inspiring passages from 1 John. Our mind naturally focuses on the attractive expressions, but we should notice too that there is an edge to it all. The mysticism is tempered by reality.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The community is living in great tensions with "the world", the Jews and the former members who have left. To help people deal with with such antagonism, the writer emphasises the evolution from "now" to "then" in a way different from the realised eschatology of the Gospel.

KIND OF WRITING

Prologue: The Word of Life (1:1-4)

I. God is light (1:5-2:27)

II. God is righteous 2:18-4:6)

III. God is love (4:7-5:12)

Epilogue: Assurances (5:13-21)

There are several subsection in II above:

A. Good right / avoiding sin (2:28-3:10)

B. Love / the New Covenant (3:11-24)

C. The Spirit of Deceit (4:1-6)

RELATED PASSAGES

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. (1John 4:7-12)

God is love, and those who abide in love

abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1John 4:16-21)

"If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'Servants are not greater than their master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. (John 15:18-21)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 Love is mentioned throughout (1 John 2:5, 10, 15; 3:1, 10-11, 14, 16-18, 23; 4:7-12, 16-5:3), with a special emphasis on love as gift. "Children" is the constant address in this letter: 1 John 2:1, 12, 14, 18, 28; 3:1-2, 7-8, 10, 18; 4:4; 5:1-2, 19, 21. It echoes Gospel usage (see above). Children of God is what we are *now*.

In the second part of v.1, the edginess of 1 John is more apparent. Behind the sentence stands an implied syllogism. Fully written out it would be something like this: those who know God also know the children of God. But they do not know God, therefore they do not know the children of God. Cf. John 15:18-21 above. Cf. this other verse:

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and *every-*

one who loves the parent loves the child. (1John 5:1)

Verse 2 In the Gospel of John, "eternal life" is defined as follows:

And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. (John 17:3)

In the IV Gospel, the tension towards the future, so typical of early Christianity, is somewhat relaxed. However, even here, when the writer mentions the word "reveal" (1 John 1:2; 2:19, 28; 3:2, 5, 8; 4:9), the word used is not *apocalyptō*, but rather *phaneroō*, meaning to cause to become visible, to disclose rather than to uncover. The writer hopes that this future hope will inspire us now, as we see from the next verses.

The change to come is unknown, of course, but somehow we shall resemble God, just as children resemble their earthly parents. This evokes Genesis 1 and being created in God's image and likeness. It is in considerable tensions with the tradition elsewhere that no one can see God and live.

But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." (Exodus 33:20; cf. Gen 32:30; Deut 4:33, 5:24, 26; Judg 6:22, 13:22, and Isa 6:5).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

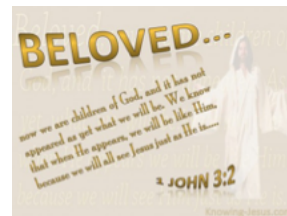
1. To enjoy the love of God and to find ourselves in a state of wonder is very much part of our spiritual lives. In the grand scheme of things, this is who we are, who I am. It is really kind of wonderful.

2. We also live with a level of not being understood in our culture. How do we cope? Am I doing anything to bear better witness to the wonder of God's love for everyone?

3. The next life *is* mysterious of its nature. And, yet we hope: *And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.* (1John 3:3)

PRAYER

Lover and creator God, as we stand before the mysterious of who you are, we know that you hold us in being and, even more, you are to us as a father and a mother. Help us embrace and enjoy your love for us that we may grow into the kind of people you would like us to be.



THE LITURGY

Acts 4:8-12; Psalm 118 (117); 1 John 3:1-2; John 10:11-18

READINGS 2 AND 3

Even though the gospel does not mention love, we know that Jesus' laying down of his life as a good shepherd is indeed the measure of his love for us.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

As the responsorial psalm is already cited in the first reading, the "fit" is perfect. This particular psalm is one of a handful used widely in the New Testament as an indication of continuity with OT revelation.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First Reading

Acts 4:9-12

The last sentence of this reading puts it up to us today. At the same time, the teaching is based on experience, which again puts it up to us.

Second Reading

1 John 3:1-2

In this brief reading we as believers are affirmed as the children of God. At the same time, we are challenged in an amazing way: our future is to become like him, no less!

Gospel

John 10:11-18

Sometimes we get so used to a passage in scripture that we miss the oddness of it. In real shepherding, shepherds do not lay down their lives for the sheep!!

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 22 April

Acts 11:1-18

Should followers of Jesus follow all the Jewish Law, including circumcision, Sabbath and food regulations? It was an important question for the first generation. The answer, given three times in a vision, shaped the future of Christianity.

John 10:1-10

We encounter another of the seven I AM sentences of this Gospel, perhaps one of the less remembered ones: I am the gate. We need to think of point of access or

encounter, as in "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

Tuesday 23 April

St George, martyr

Acts 11:19-26

This is a summary statement, letting us know about the expansion of The Way after the decision not to impose Jewish regulations on Gentiles.

John 10:22-30

The feast of Dedication (Hanukkah) is mentioned: this feast celebrated the rededication of the Temple in the previous century. At the time of writing that restored Temple was also in ruins, causing consternation for both Jews and Christians. The Christian response was to name Jesus as our shepherd, who would lead us both to God and to eternal life.

Wednesday 24 April

St Fidelis of Sigmaringen, priest, martyr

Acts 12:24-13:5

A wonderful reading for today's church. It is clear that the gifts of prophecy and teaching were abundant — and that the church is alive because they listen to the Spirit.

John 12:44-50

The preceding two verses (not in the reading) give the context for this long reflection. We are overhearing the "catechetical" voice of the Johannine community — in conflict with those who do not accept this message.

Thursday 25 April

St Mark, evangelist

1 Peter 5:5-14

The reading is chosen because it mentions a certain "Mark". According to tradition, Mark's Gospel represents the preaching of Peter. 1 Peter is a very late Christian document, written in the name of Peter, but honours that link all the same.



Mark 16:15-20

The ending of Mark's gospel—unlikely to be original—brings to expression the energy, vision and commitment behind all evangelisation. Even if not Markan in the strict sense, it can still speak to us today: evangelisation is at the heart of synodality.

Friday 26 April

Acts 13:26-33

For this scene, we have moved to Antioch in Pisidia (14 cities bore the name Antioch in antiquity!). In a typical speech, Paul started yesterday reviewing the history of salvation; today Paul gives an account of the death and resurrection of Jesus, in the light of the Holy Scriptures.

John 14:7-14

Today we hear a reading familiar from funerals; perhaps we can reflect on it today without the tragic context of death. It is really about Jesus own departure / death first of all. The last line offers us another of the great I AM sentences from this Gospel.

Saturday 27 April

St Asicus, bishop

Acts 13:44-52

The switch to the Gentiles is signalled yet again in this brief story. Most likely, the Gentiles were the so-called God-fearers, that is, people already attracted to Judaism because of its pure doctrine of God, high moral code and its antiquity.

John 14:7-14

Our reading from John is very rich again today. It does contain a startling line: *whoever believes in me will perform the same works as I do myself, he will perform even greater works*. What could that possible mean? Somehow it means that after the great event of Jesus' death and resurrection, our task is to offer salvation, the salvation not yet achieved or somehow not available before Good Friday and Easter Sunday.