

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

John 10:14

R⁷. Alleluia, alleluia.

I am the good shepherd, says the Lord;

I know my sheep, and mine know me.

R⁷. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

John 10:11-18; L50B

Jesus said:

“I am the good shepherd.

A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

A hired man, who is not a shepherd and whose sheep are not his own, sees a wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf catches and scatters them.

This is because he works for pay and has no concern for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd, and I know mine and mine know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I will lay down my life for the sheep.

I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.

These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd.

This is why 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 on my own.

I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again.

This command I have received from my Father.”

Reflecting on the Gospel

In the early church, before Jesus was depicted as suffering and dying on the cross, he was depicted as “the Good Shepherd.” This image was central to early Christian identity. We see paintings and even statues of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The cross seems to have been too painful or too inappropriate to be an effective way to portray Jesus. The Good Shepherd conveyed the Christian message much more clearly.

Today we celebrate “Good Shepherd” Sunday as we read this famous gospel story from John. We are no longer in the realm of resurrection appearance stories, but now we have entered the world of Jesus’ “I AM” parabolic discourse. In John, Jesus doesn’t preach in parables, “The kingdom of God is like . . . a shepherd, a gate, a vineyard, etc.” Instead, we hear Jesus say, “I AM the good shepherd,” or in another passage, “I AM the gate,” or “I AM the vine,” etc. Some scholars call this an “I AM” Christology of the Fourth Gospel because it is used so frequently here, as opposed to the Synoptics. It is true that the Gospel of John has an intense emphasis on the person of Jesus, reflected in a high Christology. The joke is that if you ask Jesus in the Gospel of John how he’s doing, he’ll take two chapters to say he and the Father are just fine.



The image of a shepherd is certainly one rooted in antiquity. There are not as many shepherds today as there were then. And the site of a shepherd was much more common in that culture than it is today. Yet, even though most of us probably do not know any shepherds, or even seen any recently, we are all familiar with the image. Even Pope Francis spoke about shepherds shortly after he became pope. He spoke about how he wanted priests to have “the smell of the sheep” on them. This kind of graphic, even smelly, analogy offended some people. One person responded, “That sounds gross! Did he actually say that?” But it is precisely the image Francis meant to convey about whom he wanted as priests, and the language stems from this gospel story about Jesus himself being the Good Shepherd.

Interestingly, Jesus makes a distinction in this discourse about himself as the “good shepherd” and a “hired man” who works for money. The latter has no real concern for the sheep. He is in it only for the pay. Jesus, on the other hand, loves the sheep and has concern for them. He lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand will run away at the first sign of danger. The result of his running away is that the sheep are scattered. As we consider this in our own time we can see the many Christians, many of us, who have been scattered. As we listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd and come to him, we will be reunited.

Living the Paschal Mystery

Though the imagery in today’s gospel may be foreign to our everyday experience, it rings true nonetheless. In some ways the story’s setting sounds similar to a fairy tale with the shepherd, the hired hand, a wolf, and scattered sheep. But of course, the lessons from this gospel are much more profound than a fairy tale. This gospel tells us that the kingdom of God is not merely like a shepherd and his sheep; but rather, Jesus himself is the Good Shepherd who lays down

his life for the sheep. The sheep know his voice. The Good Shepherd smells like the sheep. We can ask ourselves how we attune ourselves to the voice of the Good Shepherd. Where do we hear him calling? Have we been scattered, or are we attentive to the voice and near the Shepherd?

Jesus lays down his life for his sheep but takes it up again. The process does not conclude with the laying down, but culminates in the taking up. And thus we have the paschal mystery.

Focusing the Gospel

John 10:11-18

Jesus' figure of the Good Shepherd is not an idyllic, serene image. Palestinian shepherds were tough, earthy characters who fearlessly swung their staffs (more like clubs than walking sticks) against poachers and wolves.

While the shepherd/sheep metaphor is found throughout Scripture, Jesus' vow to lay down his life for his sheep is something new and likely shocking to his audience. Of course, the image becomes clear in light of the resurrection. But ancient shepherds did not sacrifice their own lives for sheep, even if the sheep were their own! Jesus lays down his life for us, his sheep, and is therefore rightly called the Good Shepherd.

Focusing the First Reading

Acts 4:8-12

In chapter 3 of Acts, Peter and John cure a crippled man in the temple precincts and Peter explains to the crowd who had witnessed the healing just who this Jesus is in whose name that healed the man (last Sunday's first reading). The two are quickly hauled before an angry Sanhedrin who demands an explanation for these rantings about the resurrection of the executed Jesus. Peter responds that in healing the man in the name of Jesus, God manifests the same power he revealed in raising Jesus from the dead. The healing of the crippled man is a sign of God's salvation of all who believe.

Focusing the Responsorial Psalm

Ps 118:1, 8-9, 21-23, 26, 28, 29 (22)

The antiphon in today's responsorial psalm, Psalm 118, is quoted by Peter in his sermon in the first reading. The first Christian community prayed the images and the refrain, "for his mercy endures forever," of Psalm 118 as a thanksgiving for God's great love manifested in raising Jesus from the dead.

Focusing the Second Reading

1 John 3:1-2

A common theme among Hellenistic religions was that to truly know and understand someone or something was to strive to act "like" them. In today's second reading, the writer of the First Letter of John teaches that to "know" God is to love one another as he loves us as his sons and daughters. To "know" God's love makes us more than just faithful adherents but transforms us into "children" of the God that Jesus revealed as "Father."

PROMPTS FOR HOMILISTS, CATECHISTS, AND RCIA TEAMS

Who have you known in your life who exemplifies the model of the Good Shepherd?

Who are those who daily "lay down" their lives for others?

What does the image of the Good Shepherd reveal about the role of leadership and authority?

Who are the "wolves" who force us to run away from our responsibilities as "shepherds"?

Why are certain "Sanhedrins" in our time and place so threatened by the idea of the resurrection of Jesus?