



# *Fourth Sunday after Easter*

## *Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe*



Sunday 25 April 2021

### READINGS

Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

## *Good Shepherd Sunday*

In our common Lectionary, the fourth Sunday of Easter is called Good Shepherd Sunday. It gets its name from the fact that the gospel reading in each year of the lectionary cycle comes from John Chapter 10 and so each year sheep and references to shepherds appear. In Year A, Jesus at verse seven says, 'I am the door of the sheepfold'. In Year C, Jesus says those who are His followers, the sheep of His flock, will listen to His voice and in Year B at verse eleven ( the first verse today ) Jesus says, " I am the good shepherd, the shepherd lays down His life for the sheep".

This year's passage of John offers a contrast to the other gospel readings since Easter because it is not one of the post resurrection (Easter) appearance story, rather it is set during His teaching ministry. But this account of the Gospel on this Sunday of Good Shepherd points to the fact that after Jesus has laid down His life He will "receive it back again" (John 10: 18). He freely chooses to lay down His life. By doing so Jesus is following God's will for His life. As well as the Gospel, the Psalm for this Sunday each year is Psalm 23. Another Good Shepherd theme! David paints a perfect picture of God as a good shepherd who cares, nurtures and protects his sheep!

Jesus emphasises the self-sacrificing element in his own life: "The good shepherd is one who lays down his life for his sheep." He contrasts the good shepherd who owns the sheep to someone who is simply hired to look after them. The hired man thinks primarily of his own welfare and, if he sees a wolf coming, he takes off, leaving the sheep to be attacked and scattered in fear and terror. Jesus, on the other hand, will not be like a hired person: "I lay down my life for my sheep."

The fact that a hired man would abandon the sheep as the wolf appears emphasizes the faithfulness, stability and value of a committed relationship offered by a good shepherd. The relationship between the good shepherd and the sheep goes both ways – each knows and recognises the other - as we are called to know Christ, recognise him as we too are known and recognised by him.

In the reading of Acts 4, Luke speaks of healing in divine power. We hear that the name of Jesus can transform lives. It carries with it, God's authority and healing power. In last Sunday's reading, we heard that when Peter and John went to the Temple to pray, Peter healed a crippled man, who then walked and leapt and praised God ( 3:8), and entered the Temple with them. And in today's Epistle, John and Peter

appear before the council (v. 7), and are asked to explain their actions: who empowered you to cure the lame beggar?

Acts 4 is a tough passage that has been used by others to promote Christian exclusivism – that there is no other name by which we can be saved. 4:12 "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." At first glance, this would suggest that only those who know Jesus can experience wholeness, healing and salvation. But what if we were to read it differently? Read carefully, this passage may also point to the fact that God's love in Christ is so abundant that it gives life to every avenue of salvation. 10:16 "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. Wherever wholeness and healing is found, it comes through Christ regardless of its means. The power belongs to God and not to our religious symbols and our doctrines; by God's grace the "other sheep" and ourselves find healing and salvation.

Psalm 23 – that well known poem - is equally concerned with life's challenges. We may walk through the valley of death. Enemies may surround us. We may find ourselves at risk and seeking shelter from threat, loss and death. The words of Psalm 23 tell us that threat is inevitable but we are assured that that God is with us, providing for our deepest needs in every threatening situation, if we can only stop and listen and look.

The words of 1st Letter of John point to risky, sacrificial love. Those who follow Jesus are called to sacrifice for others. The famous German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, demonstrated in his teaching that only a suffering God can help, and in our sacrifices, we bring life to the world and discover our connection with God. The story of Oscar Romero of El Salvador:

Archbishop Oscar Romero, 20th century (Champion of the poor and prophet of peace and justice in El Salvador, he was fatally shot on March 24, 1980, while saying mass. He had just read from John's Gospel: "Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains only a grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit" (Jn. 12:23-26), and had preached about the need to give one's life for others as Christ did.) And this is what he said:

"A church that doesn't provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin, a word of God that doesn't touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed--what gospel is that?"

Ultimately, we are all called to be good shepherds. We all are part of a world-wide church that is made up of caring individuals who constantly give their lives for others: missionaries struggling in the remotest parts of the world; peace activists challenging the consciences of nations; medical practitioners caring lovingly for the sick and dying – and us, simple folk who wake up each day and go about our business of restoring dignity to beggars with our small acts of kindness.