

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:20b-25; John 10:1-10

I am the gate: whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture

John 10:1 “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. 2 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5 They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” 6 Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

John 10:7 So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The Good Shepherd discourse or meditation is found only in John 10:1-21. It is the nearest thing to a parable in this Gospel. Today we hear the first part of this speech, which portrays Jesus as the point of entry, the shepherd and the door. In the first presentation, it is offered in the third person, while in the second, the writer uses the first person. This is Vocations Sunday.

KIND OF WRITING

Our text is part of John’s Gospel, which means that the words placed on the lips of Jesus are the fruit of profound meditation and spiritual insight. The writer proceeds often in a spiral so to speak, stating a theme, bringing it forward,

restating the theme with the new “freight” and so on. The writing is poetic, contemplative, apparently simple, powerful.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) In the nomadic world of the ancient Middle East, the shepherd had a different role in relation to his flock than would have been typical in our own country. The sheep were never left alone on a hillside and the shepherd, as is well-known, led rather than drove his sheep. Furthermore, it was his task to find water and pasture and to ensure safety. Because of these roles, the figure of the shepherd was used to express the duties of a ruler, as pastor of his people. The king, just like the shepherd, has to ensure safety and nourishment. In the wider Middle East, a further step was taken: just as God was called a king, likewise, even outside the bible, shepherd was used for (the) God(s).

(ii) It is not accidental that the model king in the Old Testament, David, had been a shepherd before king. As regards rulers, there are tremendous passages in the OT, especially in Ezekiel, where the metaphor of shepherding is used to challenge the political and religious leaders for their gross failures (Jer 23:2, 4; Ezek 34:8; Zech 13:7).

Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: 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; therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the

Thought for the day

What is distinctive about our faith as Christians? We do not believe in a system of ideas or even in a higher ethics: we believe in a person, who gives life “a new horizon and a decisive direction” (Benedict XVI). John’s Gospel makes this clear with its great I am sentences, one of which we hear today: “I am the gate.”

Naturally, we think the gate to what? The gate to life to the full. The risk today is to set our expectations low, to be happy with less. But the Gospel calls not to be half alive, but to be fully alive. Let us enter by the gate himself, because the gate to life is always open.

Prayer

Often, loving Lord, we find ourselves astray and defenceless. Let us recognise your voice, calling us one by one as you call us to follow you.

shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them. (Ezekiel 34:7-10)

(iii) Finally, God is both king and shepherd for the ancient Israelites, as we see from today’s responsorial psalm. See for an early example Genesis 48:15. Also, Num 27:17; Jer 31:10; Ezek 34:15; Zech 11:4; Sir 18:13.

(iv) Most notable for us is this passage from Ezekiel: *I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God.* (Ezekiel 34:15)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) Broadly, there is the language of shepherding, especially as found in the parable of the lost sheep (Matt 18:12-14; Lk 15:3-7).

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? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it

more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost. (Matthew 18:12-14)

The Johannine reflection explores this metaphor in a way personal to Jesus. Such a personal development is entirely appropriate in the following way. Jesus preached the Kingdom and so the parable of the lost sheep is a parable of the Kingdom. The early church proclaimed Jesus, as king—especially in the Fourth Gospel—and therefore also as Shepherd. Very noticeably in this Gospel, the Christian proclamation is not a system of doctrine or a code of ethics but a person, the person of Jesus, king and shepherd (with many other metaphors such as light, the vine, bread etc.). The language allows for a certain paradox, because this shepherd lays down his life for the flock, surely not something an ordinary shepherd would be expected to do literally.

(ii) Across this Gospel, the expression “I AM” has a special meaning (bread of life, light of the world, the shepherd, the gatekeeper, the gate, the resurrection, the way the truth and the life, the true vine). The background is the central revelation of God’s name in Ex 3:14, I AM WHO I AM. “I AM” is used a few times in the Greek OT simply as God’s name. Using this language, the Gospel writer makes his theology of Jesus’ identity very deep indeed.

(iii) Following to failure the convince (v. 6), Jesus makes his meaning clear by a more startling image, “I AM the door” (the image recurs only once, perhaps significantly, at 18:6). This mirrors an important phrase in the Gospel: John 14:6 Jesus said to him, “I AM the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

(iv) The imagery of knowing the voice is resumed dramatically at the resurrection scene with Mary Magdalene. The Risen Lord addresses her directly and she immediately recognises him.

(iv) Life in abundance—perhaps this is the key text?

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world

might be saved through him.” (John 3:16-17)

ST PAUL

You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us. (1Thessalonians 2:1-8)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 Very truly = Amen, amen. The warning here is against false leaders, who don’t come in by the gate, the authentic point of entry, i.e. through faith in Jesus.

Verse 2 The authentic shepherd does not enter by other means.

Verses 3-4 These are images of trust—he is recognised by the gatekeeper and by the sheep. Cf. Numbers 27:17. Cf. “Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”” (John 18:37)

Verse 5 The believers will not entrust themselves to unknown leaders. But cf. “He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.” (John 1:11) Cf. also, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,” (John 10:14); “Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” (John 13:1)

Verse 6 Not for the first time in this Gospel, Jesus is not understood. In reali-

ty, the writer makes use of such misunderstanding to emphasise and deepen his teaching.

Verse 7 The metaphorical language has taken an unexpected twist. The identification of Jesus as the point of entry in his person is entirely in harmony with this Gospel.

Verse 8 Perhaps there is an allusion to nationalist leaders (bandits to the Romans) who sometimes used the language of “messiah” to lend authority to their revolts.

Verse 9 The pastoral imagery is most fully developed here.

Verse 10 Tremendous contrast, leading to one of the great sentences of this Gospel. “Life” is an omnipresent theme: John 1:4; 3:15-17, 36; 4:14, 36; 5:21-29, 39-40; 6:27, 33, 35, 40, 47-48, 51, 53-54, 63, 68; 8:12; 10:10-11, 15, 17, 28; 11:25-26; 12:25, 50; 13:37-38; 14:6; 15:13; 17:2-3; 20:31.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. “Care” seems the fundamental image here. It invites a reflection on our own experience of being cared for, in all sorts of ways. It opens us to the experience of being cared for by God in Jesus. Prayer of being loved.

2. Guidance is part of the metaphor. In what ways have I found myself lost in the labyrinth life and in need of direction? Where did I find guidance? Does the word of God guide me today? Prayer of being accompanied.

3. In looking for meaning, when did I realise the Gospel is really not a teaching but a person? Prayer of relationship.

4. We all want to live and be alive, to have life in abundance. How am I at this point in my life? Where does faith in the Jesus as the gate come in? Prayer of being alive.

PRAYER

O God, you never cease to call even those far away, for it is your will that all be drawn into one fold.

Attune our ears to the voice of the Good Shepherd, who leads us always to you, that we may find under your tender protection life in all its fullness.

We ask 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

You have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls

Pet 2:18 *Slaves, be subject to your masters with all reverence, not only to those who are good and equitable but also to those who are perverse. 19 For whenever anyone bears the pain of unjust suffering because of consciousness of God, that is a grace. 20 But what credit is there if you are patient when beaten for doing wrong? But if you are patient when you suffer for doing what is good, this is a grace before God. 21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps.*

1 Pet 2:22 “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” 23 When he was insulted, he returned no insult; when he suffered, he did not threaten; instead, he handed himself over to the one who judges justly. 24 He himself bore our sins in his body upon the cross, so that, free from sin, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. 25 For you had gone astray like sheep, but you have now returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls. (*New American Bible, rev. ed.*)

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our reading does mention again the “shepherd of our souls” — but the overall reflection is much wider. The opening verses in italics have been restored to make sense of the reading.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The context, communities etc. may be found in the notes for Easter 2A17.

KIND OF WRITING

The outline of the letter may be found in the notes from the two preceding Sundays. Our reading comes from the long middle section of the letter. This part of the letter deals with how to live among the gentiles, while witnessing to the faith. The subsections flow like this:

2:11-4:11 Living among the Gentiles
2:11-12 The topic introduced
2:13-3:7 The Household Code
3:8-12 Peace and love towards all
3:13-22 Following Jesus’ example

The “household code” provides a key for understanding the practical teaching on behaviour. Typically, household codes outlined the duties of the members of a household to each other and to the public authorities. Cf. Eph 5:21–6:9; Col



3:18–4:1; 1 Tim 5:1–6:2; Titus 2:1–10. The whole section shows an ordered sequence:

2:13-17: the civil authorities
2:18-25: slaves and masters
3:1-7: husbands and wives

Somewhat alarmingly, our section provides a Christ-centred motivation for society’s already given norms!

RELATED PASSAGES

But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the LORD shall prosper. (Isa

53:5–10)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 18 Slavery had a wide range of meanings in the first century, from abject cruelty to high education. At least slaves are being *addressed* — itself a novelty in the household code tradition. No attempt is made to explain or defend the unjust treatment — it is just a fact of life. The question is how to respond. The language of slavery can also be generalised and used to speak of all Christians, as slave of Christ.

Verse 19 Somehow patience in suffering can be part of the slave’s relationship with God. This has nothing to do with condoning injustice and everything to do with living the inevitable experience as part of the relationship with God. Contrary to our natural response, this opportunity is a gift or grace from God.

Verse 20 V. 20a is rhetorical question expecting the answer “none.” V. 20b makes the teaching clearer: suffering for doing good is indeed an unexpected grace. How can that be?

Verses 21-22 This verse introduces a biblical citation (v. 22) and, possibly, elements of an early Christian hymn (vv. 23-25). The hymn references the Suffering Servant from Isaiah 53. Originally, the Servant’s suffering was exemplary rather than substitutionary.

Verses 23 Scholars detect in these verses traces of an early Christian hymn. V. 23 tells the story of Jesus in the language of Second Isaiah.

Verse 24-25 Jesus’ own patience suffering is offered as a model. Just as he, by the manner of his death, set us free from the power of sin, likewise we, following his example, can experience liberation and healing in our attitude to suffering. V. 25 reminds the recipients of their own original conversion to God.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. What is my own experience of suffering *as a grace*?
2. Have I known healing through the death and resurrection of Jesus?

PRAYER

God, suffering remains for us the great mystery, difficult to bear and hard to understand. Inspire us by the example of Christ to use whatever comes our way as a means of being close to Jesus and through Jesus to you, our loving God.

Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ

Acts 2:14 But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.

Acts 2:36 Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

Acts 2:37 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” 38 Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” 40 And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” 41 So those who welcomed his message were baptised, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

As is plain from the verse numbers, this is a shortened form of the Pentecost sermon of Peter. The division is correctly made, because v. 37 starts the second part.

KIND OF WRITING

As the conclusion, this shows the marks of the classical peroration, that is, summing up, touching the emotions and the final appeal. It may well be that the first major part of the speech (not here) is judicial while the second major part (also not here, except for v.36) is deliberative, following the categories of ancient rhetoric.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The reading comes from the account of Pentecost in the Acts. The outline is as follows:

- 2:1-13 Pentecost
- 2:14-41 Peter’s sermon
 - 2:14-15 Introduction
 - 2:16-21 The Spirit (Joel)
 - 2:22-36 The Christ (Psalms)
 - 2:37-41 Conclusion
- 2:42-47 Life in the community

Our reading, therefore, comes from the the conclusion describing the effect of the proclamation. It includes the opening verse and a bridge verse (v. 36). It is noticeable that the interpretation of the Pentecost event is three times as long as the event itself.

RELATED PASSAGES

Typically, the speeches in Acts are interrupted at the most important moment. We can see this:

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. (Acts 10:44)

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, “We will hear you again about this.” (Acts 17:32)

Up to this point they listened to him, but then they shouted, “Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.” (Acts 22:22)

In our reading, this technique serves both to liven up a rather long presentation and to indicate fairly directly to us the readers what the appropriate response to the *kerygma* should be.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 14 This is a classical and very respectful introduction to a speech. There are links with the Pentecost account. Voice is the same word as sound used earlier in v. 6. Declared is also the same word for the inspired speech in v. 4. His speech continues the Pentecost event and is a response to the exasperated question, “what does this mean?”

Verse 36 This sentence summarises a long argument about Jesus and his identity. Notice that three claims are made: the crucified one, is raised and is Lord and—therefore—is the Messiah. All three are vital.

Verse 37 The audience interrupts (as we saw above), taking us directly to a question we have heard before: And the crowds asked him (i.e. John the Baptist), “What then should we do?” (Luke 3:10). The interruption allows Peter to push come his conclusion on how we can access salvation.

Verse 38 Again, we have heard this

before: He (i.e. John again) went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Luke 3:3). 38a offers three elements: conversion (*metanoia*), baptism and forgiveness. 38b takes up a much wider teaching of the Acts: “And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:49) While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. (Acts 1:4) Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. (Acts 2:33) For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him. (Acts 2:39)

Verse 39 I.e. it will go on into the future and include the Gentiles.

Verse 40 This echoes what was said earlier: Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. (Acts 2:21) See also: Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls. (Joel 2:32)

Verse 41 The effectiveness of the Pentecost proclamation is apparent.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. When have I felt myself addressed “full on” by the Gospel? How did I react?

2. Conversion can sometimes be linked to a moment, but, in reality is it never an isolated moment. Not only is there always a lead up (not always obvious at the time), but there is a follow-through, given that conversion is never really over and done with—at least not for the ordinary mortal!

PRAYER

God, let your word penetrate our hearts and continue to change our lives. Only by your gift can we respond to your grace so send your grace again that we may be saved. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:20b-25; John 10:1-10

THEMES ACROSS THE READINGS

The Gospel is very clearly focused on the person of Jesus, as usual in the Fourth Gospel. Without using the same metaphors, the first reading is also centred on Jesus, whom “God has made him both Lord and Messiah.” Of course, earlier in Peter’s speech, in verses not used for the reading, there is reference to David, the proverbial shepherd-king, making an implied link.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The Psalm—the Lord is my Shepherd—is more directed to the Gospel reading, with the imagery of shepherd. Nevertheless, it is also suitable as a response to the proclamation resurrection and the response of conversion. There is a kind of home-coming which matches the gathering in which is the response to Peter’s sermon.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Acts 2:14a, 36-41

Today, we hear a typical example of early Christian preaching. It illustrates an important question: if this is so, what should we do?

Second reading

1 Peter 2:20b-25

Is there a link between Jesus’ action and behaviour and our action and behaviour today? This reading says a firm “yes.” Towards the end of the reading, we hear of Jesus, our shepherd.

Gospel

Matthew 2:1-12

How can we discover or rediscover God and Christ? The human condition may be summarised as “the heart in pilgrimage.”

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 4 May

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 5 May

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 6 May

Acts 12:24-13:5

The missionary journeys were an important development in early Christianity. Today, we hear of the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas, sponsored by the church in Antioch in Syria (modern Antakya).

John 12:44-50

Our reading today brings to a close the Galilee ministry of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel. It has, therefore, the feeling of a summary or gathering in of topics, which is evident in this compressed reading, every line of which could be a source of meditation.

Thursday 7 May

Acts 13:13-25

The continuing story of Paul takes us rather breathlessly to Antioch in Pisidia (Turkey today). We hear the first part of a sermon, outlining the story of salva-

tion until the ministry of John the Baptist. You may notice the emphasis on David—great symbol of God’s faithfulness *through time*, fulfilled in Jesus. Tomorrow we get to hear the second part of the sermon, when Paul challenges the hearers directly.

John 13:16-20

Our reading from John takes place at the Last Supper and follows the washing of the feet. As it draws out some of the meaning of the foot washing it also looks ahead to Jesus betrayal.

Friday 8 May

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 9 May

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.