

Closing 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
recognize 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.

*Opening prayers*⁶ · Easter 4B

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

Principal Service readings

[Genesis 7.1-5,11-18; 8.6-18; 9.8-13]

Acts 4.5-12	Peter's defence of the faith
Psalm 23	The Lord is my shepherd
1 John 3.16-24	The proof of love
John 10.11-18	Jesus, the good shepherd

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
speak to our hearts in the stillness,
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

Gospel Reading

Jesus, the good shepherd

Jesus said to the Pharisees: ¹"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ²The 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. ³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ⁶I 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. ⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ⁸No 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.'

John 10.11-18 NRSV¹

⁶ *Opening prayers : scripture-related collects for the years A, B and C from the sacramentary* / International Commission on English in the Liturgy. – Norwich : Canterbury Press, 1999.

¹ *New Revised Standard Version Bible* is copyright © 1989 Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

Comments and Questions

There is a strong biblical tradition of presenting unfaithful leaders of Israel as bad shepherds who let the wolves attack them,² but it is generally acknowledged that there is no direct citation from the Old Testament in John 10.1-18.³ Throughout the Old Testament God is spoken of as the shepherd of his people, and, when the people are in exile, God is spoken of as the future good shepherd gathering his flock.⁴ As the monarchy disappeared prophets spoke of a future Davidic figure who would shepherd the people.⁵ And so the idea emerges of the 'one shepherd' who will form 'one flock':

I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them; he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them.

Ezekiel 34.23-24; cf. 37.24

This provides the background for the words of Jesus in John 10.1-18. Jesus plays on the idea of both positive and negative shepherds, and the use of a 'door' in pastoral practice. There are two ways to enter the sheepfold, depending in whether you wish to harm or care for the sheep. Jesus pictures himself as the 'door' through who access to good pasture is made available and the sheep protected. Jesus is 'the good shepherd' in contrast to the bad shepherds, but, more that this, Jesus introduces his own uniqueness: 'the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep' (10.11). In contrast the hireling is only interested in personal gain (10.12). The reader links the hireling with 'the Jews' who have repeatedly refused to accept the claims of Jesus that he is from God, that he will return to God, and that he makes God known.

Jesu again announces, 'I am the good shepherd' (10.14). Now he is no longer concerned with rival claims, He focuses instead on his relationship with his flock (10.14-16) and with the Father (10.17-18). This

² See Jeremiah 23.1-8; Ezekiel 34; 2.27; Zephaniah 3.3; Zechariah 10.2-3; 11.4-17.

³ Moloney (1998), p.301.

⁴ See Jeremiah 31.10; 13.17; 23.3; Isaiah 40.11; 49.9-10; Ezekiel 34.11-16; Zephaniah 3.19; Micah 2.12; 4.6-7; Ecclesiastes 12.11; Wisdom 18.13.

⁵ See Micah 5.3; Jeremiah 3.15; 23.4-6; Ezekiel 34.23-24; 37.24; Zechariah 13.7-9.

is made clear by his use of the verb 'to know' (*ginoskein*). He knows his sheep and his sheep know him, but this is set in the context that Jesus also knows the Father (10.15). This mutual knowledge and intimacy leads to the Good Shepherd laying down his life for the sheep (10.15).

Quotations

1

God has, in fact, thought of us from eternity and has loved us as unique individuals. He has called every one of us by name, as the Good Shepherd 'calls His sheep by name.'

Pope John Paul II, 1920–2005

2

I saw a young sister, just before this service; and I said to her, 'When did you find the Lord?' She replied, 'It was when I was very ill.' Yes, it is often so; God makes us ill in body that we may have time to think of Him, and turn to Him....What would become of some people if they were always in good health, or if they were always prospering? But tribulation is the black dog that goes after the stray sheep, and barks them back to the Good Shepherd. I thank God that there are such things as the visitations of correction and of holy discipline, to preserve our spirit, and bring us to Christ.

Charles Spurgeon, 1834–1892

Related topics

For further study:

Jesus, the Good Shepherd; Christology; paschal mystery; initiation sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and eucharist; symbols of the Easter Vigil; sacramentality; love of God; faith; discipleship; grace; soteriology