

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

4th Sunday of Easter

Year B

21 April 2024



Collect

Almighty ever-living God,
lead us to a share in the joys of heaven,
so that the humble flock may reach
where the brave Shepherd has gone before.
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

Who can forget what Pope Francis had to say about evangelisers in his mission manifesto, *The Joy of the Gospel*? They should take on, he wrote, “the smell of the sheep.” It’s a theme he’s often returned to since; here’s what he wrote back in 2013, quite soon after his election. “An evangelising community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelisers thus take on the ‘smell of the sheep’ and the sheep are willing to hear their voice. An evangelising community is also supportive, standing by people at every step of the way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this may prove to be” (#24). As Francis makes clear, we don’t do this alone, but as a community.

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles 4:8–12

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter said: 'Rulers of the people, and elders! If you are questioning us today about an act of kindness to a cripple, and asking us how he was healed, then I am glad to tell you all, and would indeed be glad to tell the whole people of Israel, that it was by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, the one you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by this name and by no other that this man is able to stand up perfectly healthy, here in your presence today. This is the stone rejected by you the builders, but which has proved to be the keystone. For of all the names in the world given to men, this is the only one by which we can be saved.'

Responsorial Psalm Ps 117:1, 8–9, 21–23, 26, 28–29

R. The stone rejected by the builders
has become the corner stone.

or

R. Alleluia.

Give thanks to the Lord for he is good,
for his love has no end.

It is better to take refuge in the Lord
than to trust in men:

it is better to take refuge in the Lord
than to trust in princes. **R.**

I will thank you for you have given answer
and you are my saviour.

The stone which the builders rejected
has become the corner stone.

This is the work of the Lord,
a marvel in our eyes. **R.**

Blessed in the name of the Lord
is he who comes.

We bless you from the house of the Lord;
I will thank you for you have given answer
and you are my saviour.

Give thanks to the Lord for he is good;
for his love has no end. **R.**

First Reading

The opening of today's reading is bold and brief. In a few words, Luke attests to the agency of the Holy Spirit and Peter calls us to attention along with the Jewish authorities. The occasion for his speech – “an act of kindness to a cripple” – is alluded to but not explained. Luke has reported the healing earlier, in Acts 3:1–10, a passage that is never heard on a Sunday. It would do readers no harm to check it out. It's for this cure and their preaching that Peter and John are called to account, just as Jesus was in Luke 20:1–12. In each case, it's the religious authorities, not the people, that demand an answer. In his speech Peter repeats what is a recurring refrain in Acts, that Jesus died at the hands of human beings but was raised by divine power. This slogan-like assertion serves well in the apostolic preaching, but leaves modern questions about human responsibility unanswered. Peter is at pains to attribute the cripple's cure to “the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth,” meaning the power of the risen Lord. His use of Psalm 117/118:22 – “the stone that was rejected ... has become the cornerstone” – is one of several such instances in the New Testament, including one by Jesus himself (Lk 20:17). Today it recurs in the responsorial psalm.

Peter is addressing a Jewish assembly, but his final assertion – that people can be saved only by the name of Jesus Christ – throws down the gauntlet to the Roman emperor as well. This confident and authoritative speech of Peter's deserves to be proclaimed in the same spirit. Readers may benefit from checking the text's layout in the NRSV lectionary, noting also that it renders “men” as “mortals.”

Responsorial Psalm

Once again, the responsorial psalm is sourced from Psalm 117/118. Much of the previous commentary is repeated here. The psalm's particular affinity with the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection is reflected in its use not only today but also at the Paschal Vigil and on the first two Sundays of Easter. This fourth appearance is distinguished by the choice of verses, their structure and the response. The latter – “The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” – might once have been a proverb about how dramatic reversals of fortune can take place. Jesus incorporated it into one of his parables (Mt 21:42) before it was applied to Jesus himself by early Christian preachers (as Peter has done today) and writers (eg 1 Pt 2:7).

In its original form the psalm was a processional hymn to accompany entry into the Temple. It celebrates the victory of an individual (perhaps a king) over a hostile threat. The three stanzas come from different parts of the psalm. The first calls on the community to give thanks to God and put their trust in divine rather than human help. The second and third applaud the Lord for the deliverance which the psalmist and, by extension, the community has enjoyed. The acclamation with which the third stanza begins – “Blessed in the name of the Lord is he who comes” – will be familiar from the gospel for Palm Sunday and the “Holy, holy” chant at Mass. Readers have a range of things to attend to in their praying of this psalm – the blend of the personal and the communal, the allusion to personal crisis, and its overall tone of exuberance. There's also the uncommon instance of all three stanzas being in six-line form. An upward inflexion at the end of each fourth line should alert the assembly that there's more to come. All in all, this is a psalm to proclaim in festive spirit.

A reading from the first letter of St John 3:1–2

Think of the love that the Father has lavished on us,
by letting us be called God's children;
and that is what we are.
Because the world refused to acknowledge him,
therefore it does not acknowledge us.
My dear people, we are already the children of God
but what we are to be in the future has not yet been
revealed;
all we know is, that when it is revealed
we shall be like him
because we shall see him as he really is.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John

10:11–18

Jesus said:

'I am the good shepherd:
the good shepherd is one who lays down his life for his
sheep.

The hired man, since he is not the shepherd
and the sheep do not belong to him,
abandons the sheep and runs away
as soon as he sees a wolf coming,
and then the wolf attacks and scatters the sheep;
this is because he is only a hired man
and has no concern for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd;
I know my own
and my own know me,
just as the Father knows me
and I know the Father;
and I lay down my life for my sheep.
And there are other sheep I have
that are not of this fold,
and these I have to lead as well.
They too will listen to my voice,
and there will be only one flock
and one shepherd.

The Father loves me,
because I lay down my life
in order to take it up again.
No one takes it from me;
I lay it down of my own free will,
and as it is in my power to lay it down,
so it is in my power to take it up again;
and this is the command I have been given by my
Father.'

Second Reading

In the majestic prologue to his gospel, John wrote of the Word that "his own people did not accept him. But to all who did accept him he gave power to become children of God" (1:12). These contrasting themes of rejection and adoption reappear in today's short passage from John's first letter. There are other connections with the fourth gospel. In 13:33, Jesus addresses the disciples as "my little children." And in 16:3, he warns them of rejection by those who "have never known either the Father or myself."

Another feature of today's text is its depiction of the Christian life as both "now and not yet." Already believers are children of God, but what they will become "has not yet been revealed." This tension between present and future is common to both Testaments. In Romans, for example, Paul writes that the baptised have become children of God (8:16) but the glory ahead remains "as yet unrevealed" (8:18). There's further common ground between John and Paul. Both insist that it is by God's gift, not by our efforts, that we are children of God.

In sum, these few verses condense teaching that is treated at length elsewhere. The wording is simple and clear, and the message full of encouragement, apart from its passing reference to the world's denial. It invites a delivery that is warm, appreciative and unhurried.

Gospel

Many things distinguish John's gospel from the other three. In the synoptic gospels Jesus is depicted out and about in the countryside and as a keen observer of nature. Many of his parables are rooted in the agricultural life of the land. In John, by contrast, much of Jesus' teaching and ministry takes place in Jerusalem. The only significant references that Jesus makes to country life are here in the good shepherd discourse and later when he calls himself the vine (15:1). Even then, it could be argued that Jesus is drawing as much on biblical tradition as on actual observation.

Somewhat paradoxically, given the hardships and isolation of the shepherd's life, Israel's rulers were likened to shepherds. All too often they failed dismally in their task, as Ezekiel makes abundantly clear (34:1-31). This sorry history would have been well known to Jesus' audience. The new and striking facet of his address is the fourfold reference he makes to laying down his life. Jesus presents this as much more than a risk he is prepared to gamble on; it is a determined choice. In John's gospel, Jesus is a free agent, not a passive victim.

A second feature of Jesus' discourse is the affirmation of his intimacy both with the Father and with those who believe in him. These personal inter-relationships are characterised by a deep mutual knowing illumined by love. Ironically, the communion of love about which Jesus speaks will only be realised through his rejection and execution.

As familiar as much of this passage may be, it still warrants a sympathetic and reflective delivery.

An alternative translation of the scripture readings is given here from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). This may be particularly useful for those in parishes which use the NRSV Lectionary.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles

4:8–12

While Peter and John were speaking
to the people about the resurrection of Jesus,
the captain of the temple arrested them and placed them in custody.
The next day the rulers, elders and scribes assembled.
When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired,
"By what power or by what name did you do this?"
Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them,
"Rulers of the people and elders,
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,
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.
"This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you,
the builders; it has become the cornerstone.'
There is salvation in no one else,
for there is no other name under heaven
given among mortals by which we must be saved."

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the first letter of John

3:1–2

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.
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.

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the holy gospel according to John

10:11–18

Jesus said to the Pharisees:
"I am the good shepherd.
The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.
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.
The hired hand runs away
because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

"I am the good shepherd.
I know my own and my own know me,
just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.
And I lay down my life for the sheep.
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.
"For this reason 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 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."

Blessing for Easter

May God, who by the Resurrection of his Only Begotten Son
was pleased to confer on us
the gift of redemption and of adoption,
give us gladness by his blessing.
Amen.

May he, by whose redeeming work
we have received the gift of everlasting freedom,
make us heirs to an eternal inheritance.
Amen.

And may we, who have already risen with Christ
in Baptism through faith,
by living in a right manner on this earth,
be united with him in the homeland of heaven.
Amen.

And may the blessing of almighty God,
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
come down on us and remain with us for ever.
Amen.

(Adapted from the Solemn Blessing for Easter Time, Roman Missal p 712.)