

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

4th Sunday of Easter

Year B

25 April 2021



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

The fourth Sunday of Easter is known as Good Shepherd Sunday. Every year the gospel reading is taken from one part or another of Jesus' discourse on this theme in the tenth chapter of John.

Lest we rob the image of its power by contenting ourselves with sentimental representations, the opening prayer of the Mass reminds us of what is at stake. It speaks of the "brave Shepherd (who) has gone before". For all of its romantic appeal, naming Jesus as our good shepherd implicates us in his unconditional self-sacrifice. It was the courage with which he entered the dark mystery of death that enabled him to break through to the realm of life for us.

At the very heart of the Easter season we retrace the path of love that led Jesus to the cross and beyond. This is the path we are challenged to take, fired with the Spirit to live the paschal mystery in the freedom that is ours as the children of God.

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 whole story of Peter's cure of the crippled beggar and its aftermath occupies almost all of Chapters 3 and 4 in Acts. Last Sunday's reading presented a short section of Peter's speech to the people immediately after the cure; today's text, also short, is part of his address to the Jewish authorities the following day. Peter and John, like Jesus, have been arrested and are on trial.

There's an echo of Pentecost in Peter's being "filled with the Holy Spirit". Thus inspired, he insists that the cripple's cure has not been his work but that of "Jesus Christ the Nazarene", crucified and risen. He goes on to cite a verse from Psalm 117/118 though this is not made clear in the lectionary text (compare the NRSV). This psalm is used repeatedly in the New Testament to interpret Jesus' death and resurrection; it also serves as today's responsorial psalm.

The body of the reading consists in one long sentence. Readers should clarify for themselves how the several clauses in the sentence are interconnected (for this the layout of the NRSV may be helpful). They are like branches drawing their strength from the trunk of the tree, namely the declaration that "it is by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene . . . that this man is able to stand up perfectly healthy . . .". Readers will need to practise this sentence so that the surrounding material sheds light on rather than obscures the key point that Peter is making. The final two sentences reinforce this claim and should be proclaimed with deliberation and positive authority.

Overall the tone of the reading is one of bold and joyful affirmation. As usual the NRSV provides an inclusive-language text.

Responsorial Psalm

As on the first two Sundays of Easter, both the response and the verses of the responsorial psalm come from Psalm 117/118, widely used by the early Christian community to interpret Jesus' death and resurrection. It originated as a song of thanksgiving offered by a person who had been delivered from distress. The setting of the prayer is that of a public religious festival and thus it blends the personal with the communal.

The response, taken from the body of the psalm, is the text cited by Peter in his speech before the Jewish authorities. The verses are selected from different parts of the psalm. The first two have six lines while the third has seven, so the reader will need to give clear vocal and visual cues to the congregation for the response to the verses.

From beginning to end the psalm is a confession both of faith and of praise. It has a degree of solemnity that should be evident in the reader's delivery. At the same time the spirit with which it should be proclaimed is one of heartfelt praise and thanks.

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

The short excerpt from the first letter of John that is today's second reading may have a familiar ring. It is used often enough at funeral services because of its reference to the time "when we shall see (God) as he really is". The dominant emphasis, however, is not on future promise but on present reality, for "we are already the children of God".

Like the letter as a whole this passage has a meditative quality about it; it invites us to dwell within the mystery, the wonderful mystery of the love that God has lavished on us. But even as the author sheds light on this glorious truth, he also draws attention to the dark shadow of the world's refusal to acknowledge God and the Christian community.

Both the brevity of the reading and its contemplative spirit invite the reader to deliver the text slowly and prayerfully. This will give the congregation the opportunity to see and know the truth for themselves.

Gospel

In Year B we hear the second part of Jesus' "good shepherd" discourse in Chapter 10 of John. It is here that Jesus identifies himself explicitly as the good shepherd. The unifying thread of the passage is Jesus' readiness to be such a true shepherd that he is willing to lay down his life for the flock.

Depicting Israel's leaders and rulers as shepherds is a common theme in the Old Testament. The prophets have much to say about these shepherds, true and false; Ezekiel in particular presents a sustained critique of them that is well worth reading (34:1-31). True leaders devote themselves to the welfare of the people in the same way that a shepherd cares for his flock. All the same there does not appear to be an explicit expectation that a shepherd be willing to sacrifice his life to save his sheep. This characterisation of the good shepherd seems to be prompted by the Christian determination to interpret Jesus' shocking death as full of meaning and purpose.

Jesus presents himself as true shepherd in two senses. He defends the flock from the external threat of wolves (probably false teachers) and also devotes himself to nurturing its internal life. Interwoven in the gospel narrative are typical Johannine themes: the intimate relationship between Jesus and "his own" and between Jesus and his Father, the sovereign freedom with which Jesus acts, and his profound desire for unity. These themes are taken up at length in the chapters that form Jesus' farewell discourse with his disciples (Jn 13-17).

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.)