



4th Sunday of Easter



Date: Sunday, May 12, 2019 | **Season:** Easter | **Year:** C

First Reading: Acts 13:14, 43–52

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 100:1–3, 5 | **Response:** Psalm 100:3c

Second Reading: Revelation 7:9, 14b–17

Gospel Acclamation: John 10:14

Gospel Reading: John 10:27–30

Preached at: the Jesuit Institute in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Our readings today are bound together with two overarching questions. The first question we might reflect on is who do we listen to? The second is do we know what time it is?

What has appeared repeatedly in our Easter readings is the story of the Church's universal mission.

In our first reading today we have moved several more chapters into the Acts of the Apostles and we find ourselves no longer with the early Church in Jerusalem where we were last week, but with Paul and Barnabas as they set out on their first missionary journey through what is today southwestern Turkey. They had been chosen by the Christians in Antioch to preach the Good News along the south coast of Turkey – taking the gospel message well outside of Jerusalem.

Now the Church has warned that certain parts of the Acts of the Apostles that are read during the Easter season must 'be approached with caution'. Today's reading in which Paul categorically declares the Jews "unworthy of eternal life" is one example where we must be cautious. We should realize that the Acts of the Apostles is St Luke's attempt to explain how a Jewish movement became so thoroughly non-Jewish, how it grew into the Church we find ourselves members of. Today's reading is the first of three passages in which Paul, rejected by his Jewish contemporaries, determines to take the Gospel to the Gentiles, and in so doing, turns Christianity from a Jewish sect into a global religion. As we will

see, salvation is intended for everyone who listens to the voice of the Good Shepherd who desired that all sheep be saved – even the lost ones. This is a universal mission with a promise of salvation for all.

What we see in the first reading is Paul's method of evangelizing. He first went to the Jewish synagogues in the area to tell the Jewish congregations about Jesus being their messiah – and that Jesus' teaching extended to welcoming the Gentiles. Their preaching would endear themselves to the Gentiles and some of the local Jews, but we hear how the synagogue authorities would try to persecute them and so they would move to the next city. Despite the opposition Paul would not be discouraged. He had clearly heard his calling and was determined to listen to that voice that told him to be an apostle to the Gentiles. To spread the good news not only to the Jews but to everyone.

Our responsorial psalm comes from a larger song of praise to God's goodness in Israel. We hear how good the Lord is, that we serve him with gladness, that he is our God and we are his people, the sheep of his flock. This resonates with what we heard in the first reading about Paul's message to the Jews that all of us, whether Jew or Gentile, are called to be part of God's flock. This calling to be part of the flock also resonates with our Gospel today about the Good Shepherd. Can we respond to our calling with gladness?

This image from the psalm is magnified in our second reading from the book of Revelation. Here we see John's description of the heavenly throne room of God. The purpose of Paul's missionary work in the first reading, to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to all peoples, is reflected in the image of the vast multitude of people of every race, language, tribe and tongue who now enjoy the final fullness of the gospel's message of forgiveness and eternal life. We are told the gathered men and women hold palm branches victoriously and wear white robes. This is triumphant symbolism of an assured victory in the end. We are told by the elder that each of them has achieved happiness with God only by enduring persecution and even martyrdom at the hands of those who opposed their faith on earth. Here we can see some parallels between the trials of the Christian community as a whole and Paul's life story as an apostle. Paul did not give up. He was faithful to his calling and mission to spread the good news.

Our Gospel is similar to this reading from Revelation. The only real difference between the two texts is in their timing. Both readings announce the consequence of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Lamb who shepherds the multitude of people who have washed their robes in his blood. To each of them he gives eternal life, we hear in our Gospel; and we hear in our second reading from Revelation that he will lead them to the springs of life-giving water. What one reading announces as a present reality is expected in the other as a future event. For ourselves, in 2019, the good news of Easter is that the time that is coming is already here. Christ is Risen and is with us now. The question we need to reflect on is do we know what time we are living in. Are we trapped in the past, or hoping for a future? Or can we see the gift of God's good news to us in our present?

Our Gospel comes from the tenth chapter of St John's Gospel which itself is a larger reflection on Jesus the Good Shepherd. The first 30 verses warn us against false shepherds and shows how the Good Shepherd knows his flock by name, and how he would give his life to protect his flock. We're told how his care extends not only to his own sheep but to those who have no shepherd, the sheep who are lost or who belong to another master, this Good Shepherd wants to make all of them into one flock. What we hear today, the last four verses of this much longer passage, is the promise that his flock will have everlasting life if we follow Him. The image of a shepherd might be foreign to many of us today. When I close my eyes and see a shepherd, I see a sheep dog herding the sheep and a shepherd, a man with a stick walking along the hills and calling out. In whatever time and place, I think it's true to say that a shepherd calls his sheep. We are asked today to listen to his voice.

Each year the Church celebrates what it calls Good Shepherd Sunday.

The theme for Good Shepherd Sunday is different for each year of the liturgical cycle. In year A, Christ is the sheepgate through which authentic pastors and sheep pass. In year B, he is the shepherd who guides, protects, and cares for his sheep. In year C, today's reading, the response of the sheep to the shepherd's lead is emphasized.

We might ask ourselves How do you listen for the voice of Christ? In a world saturated by sheer noise – can we listen to God. Very often we will encounter him in the silence of our hearts. Can we still our hearts to listen to him? Ask

yourself where have you encountered the voice of Christ? And if you have encountered him – how have you responded?

Of course, one cannot reflect today about the Good Shepherd without also acknowledging the sin in our church that some of our shepherds have not been good. That some shepherds have been the very wolves they should have protected us from. That is why this week's announcement by Pope Francis of new laws that hold bishops accountable, and oblige all members of the church to report any abuse or misconduct, or any cover-up of abuse or misconduct, is good news, and is perhaps further proof that what we heard in today's Gospel is true. That God – the Good Shepherd – will not abandon his flock. The language in our Gospel has at times been likened to the prophecy by Ezekiel in chapter 34 – that God will not tolerate evil shepherds over his people ever again but will himself watch over his people as their shepherd. For myself, I see Pope Francis' actions this week following the very important meeting of all presidents of bishops' conferences around the world in February to make concrete changes to the Church to never allow such crimes to take place again, as proof that God is watching over and protecting his Church. Let's pray today, and give thanks and praise the Lord, that we are part of the flock – that we can know and encounter this Easter the risen Lord, who is the Good Shepherd who will unite us and save us and shield us from those who would wish to harm the Church.

I asked at the beginning do we know what time it is, and who do we listen to? I think, in this Easter Time we might recognize the call of the Risen Lord to each of us. But also, in this time in our Church, where we see reforms being made – and persecutions and attacks against the reformers too – we might recognize that we are in a time where we must steadfastly and prayerfully listen to the Holy Spirit who is talking to us, calling each of us to a personal vocation of a living and loving relationship with Jesus, our Good Shepherd. Just as St Paul was not deterred from his mission to spread the Good News; and just as Jesus was prepared to lay down his life; so our shepherds too, today, must persevere. Let us pray today for Pope Francis and the continuing work of our bishops, our shepherds, who are more and more listening to the voice of God through the Holy Spirit who is with us today, in our time, and continues to shepherd the Church and make all her children safe.

Let us also pray, with the Easter bombings of catholic Churches fresh in our minds, for all our modern-day martyrs who have lost their lives for their faith. Let us pray that despite the persecution of Christians – even in our own age – we will not stop listening to the voice of Him who calls us, who calls all of us, to be one flock, united under one Good Shepherd. Amen.

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