

Weekend Readings & Reflections

May 7-8, 2022: Fourth Sunday of Easter

Reflection: *Israel's mission—to be God's instrument of salvation to the ends of the earth (see Isaiah 49:6)—is fulfilled in the Church. By the "Word of God" that Paul and Barnabas preach in today's First Reading, a new covenant people is being born, a people who glorify the God of Israel as the Father of them all. The Church for all generations remains faithful to the grace of God given to the Apostles, continues their saving work. Through the Church, the peoples of every land hear the Shepherd's voice, and follow Him (see Luke 10:16). The Good Shepherd of today's Gospel is the enthroned Lamb of today's Second Reading. In laying down His life for His flock, the Lamb brought to pass a new Passover (see 1 Corinthians 5:7), by His blood freeing "every nation, race, people and tongue" from bondage to sin and death. The Church is the "great multitude" John sees in his vision today. God swore to Abraham his descendants would be too numerous to count. And in the Church, as John sees, this promise is fulfilled (compare Revelation 7:9; Genesis 15:5). The Lamb rules from the throne of God, sheltering His flock, feeding their hunger with His own Body and Blood, leading them to "springs of life-giving waters" that well up to eternal life (see John 4:14). The Lamb is the eternal Shepherd-King, the son of David foretold by the prophets. His Church is the Kingdom of all Israel that the prophets said would be restored in an everlasting covenant (see Ezekiel 34:23-31; 37:23-28). It is not a kingdom any tribe or nation can jealously claim as theirs alone. The Shepherd's Word to Israel is addressed now to all lands, calling all to worship and bless His name in the heavenly Temple. This is the delight of the Gentiles—that we can sing the song that once only Israel could sing, today's joyful Psalm: "He made us, His we are—His people, the flock He tends."*

OPENING PRAYER

Leader: Welcome to our discussion for the fourth Sunday of Easter. Since it is also Good Shepherd Sunday, let us begin in prayer for vocations:

All: Almighty Father, You have created us for some definite purpose. Grant us the grace to know the path You have planned for us in this life and to respond with a generous "Yes." Make our archdiocese, parishes, homes, and hearts fruitful ground for Your gift of vocations. May our young people respond to Your call with courage and zeal. Stir among our men a desire and the strength to be good and holy priests. Bless us with the consecrated religious, and those called to a chaste single life, permanent deacons and faithful husbands and wives, who are a sign of Christ's love for His church. We commend our prayer for vocations to You, Father, with the intercession of Mary our Mother, in the Holy Spirit, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leader: Today's Gospel reading underscores how being a Christian means being willing to lay down our life for others like the good shepherd did for us. In doing so, we are united with our fellow Christians through our suffering. Let us begin our time together by placing ourselves in this scene in Jerusalem with Jesus teaching his disciples about following him as the good shepherd. Imagine that Jesus has just said that no one can take his flock out of his hand. How does his willingness to lay down his life for his sheep make him a trustworthy shepherd who will never lose his sheep? Just as Jesus laid down his life for his flock, you now recognize this call extends to you as well. Ask Jesus to show you how you can lay down your life for others, seeking to deepen Christian unity. Reflect on this as we watch the week video for this week.

Digging Deeper – Priests: Our Shepherds and Guides

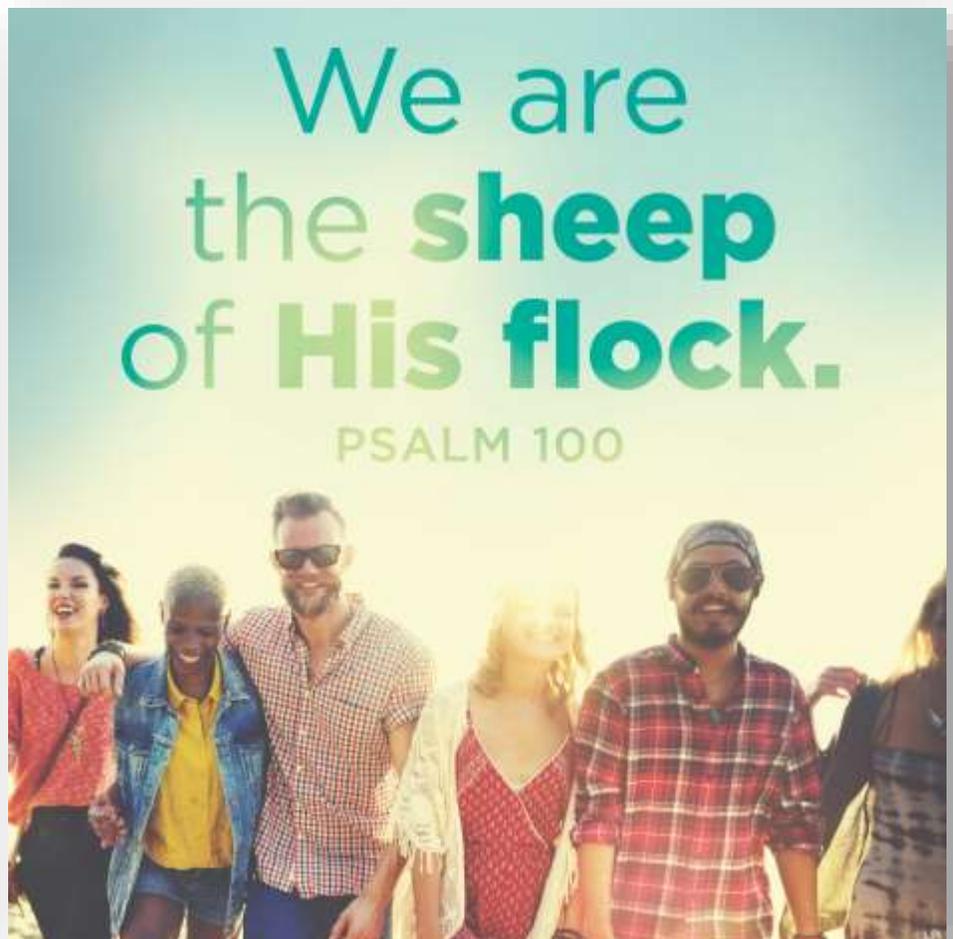
"The Church, the people of God, constantly experiences the reality of this prophetic message and continues joyfully to thank God for it. She knows that Jesus Christ himself is the living, supreme, and definitive fulfillment of God's promise: 'I am the good shepherd' (John 10:11). He, 'the great shepherd of the sheep' (Hebrews 13:20), entrusted to the apostles and their successors the ministry of shepherding God's flock (John 21:15ff.; 1Peter 5:2). Without priests the Church would not be able to live that fundamental obedience which is at the very heart of her existence and her mission in history, an obedience in response to the command of Christ: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations' (Matthew 28:19) and 'Do this in remembrance of me' (Luke 22:19; cf. 1 Corinthians 11:24), i.e., an obedience to the command to announce the Gospel and to renew daily the sacrifice of the giving of his body and the shedding of his blood for the life of the world." —Pope St. John Paul II in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, On Priestly Formation, 1

SECOND READING ~ Revelations 7:9, 14b-17 ~

Paul and Barnabas continued on from Perga and reached Antioch in Pisidia. On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and took their seats. Many Jews and worshipers who were converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who spoke to them and urged them to remain faithful to the grace of God. On the following Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and with violent abuse contradicted what Paul said. Both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, “It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first, but since you reject it and condemn yourselves as unworthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, I have made you a light to the Gentiles, that you may be an instrument of salvation to the ends of the earth.” The Gentiles were delighted when they heard this and glorified the word of the Lord. All who were destined for eternal life came to believe, and the word of the Lord continued to spread through the whole region. The Jews, however, incited the women of prominence who were worshipers and the leading men of the city, stirred up a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their territory. So they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them, and went to Iconium. The disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit.

In the 50 days after Easter the Church listens continuously to the Acts of the Apostles (the Gospel of the Church as it is sometimes called). Paul’s first missionary journey lasted some 13 years! He encountered violent abuse and persecution. But he could not stop sharing the message of God’s love, forgiveness, and the truth revealed in Jesus.

- *Do you know a missionary in the Church and the challenges they face? What do you think the mission is in your own country, parish?*



SECOND READING ~ Revelations 7:9, 14b-17 ~

I, John, had a vision of a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue. They stood before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands. Then one of the elders said to me, “These are the ones who have survived the time of great distress; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. “For this reason they stand before God’s throne and worship him day and night in his temple. The one who sits on the throne will shelter them. They will not hunger or thirst anymore, nor will the sun or any heat strike them. For the Lamb who is in the center of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to springs of life-giving water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Shaking dust off one’s feet was a ritual action Jews performed when returning from Gentile (non-believing) lands. When Paul and Barnabas did this action to the Jews and went to the Gentiles it would have been interpreted as a great insult. Sometimes it requires great courage to move outside traditional boundaries.

- *Have you experienced a missionary zeal to go further than what is normal and acceptable to live and bring Christ to others? What happened?*

The Book of Revelation unveils the future and provides a heavenly image of those who have endured great persecution and sacrificed their life for peace, justice, and freedom. Their white robes symbolize these inner virtues. It is a picture of all the faithful - saints in Heaven.

- *Have you recognized the freedom (and religious freedom) of your country and your life has been won at great cost by those who have gone before you? What do you think this great multitude would say to you today? What religious truths would you be willing to enter into great distress to defend?*

GOSPEL ~ John 10:27-30 ~

Jesus said: “My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. No one can take them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one can take them out of the Father’s hand. The Father and I are one.”

The context of John 10 is the great Jewish Feast of Dedication. It was a celebration of military victory of Judas Maccabeus who led an army (164BCE) against the occupying Greeks who had desecrated the Jewish Temple by putting the Greek god Zeus on the altar making it unclean. (See Dan 8:13) They killed and chased out their oppressors, destroyed false idols, built a new altar and rededicated the Temple. In Jn 10 they ask Jesus if he is the promised Messiah - and will he raise up arms and inspire an Army to overcome the occupying Roman forces!? He responds: he is the Good Shepherd. Salvation and healing of the world will come through listening to his voice not the taking up of arms.

- *A soldier or shepherd. What are the similarities and differences of these two images?*

A striking image in contemporary Jerusalem and nearby Bethlehem is young and old shepherds daily walking their small flock of 15 sheep to grass or water. Tender and watchful care is given to the sheep. So familiar are the sheep with their shepherd they know their particular voice.

- *In what ways do you listen to God? Have you experienced a desire to love and care so deeply for God’s family that you are willing to lay down your life and become a shepherd?*

MEDITATION

How secure is your faith and trust in God? Jesus speaks of the tremendous trust he has in God His Father and the tremendous trust we ought to have in Him because He is our Good Shepherd (John 10:11). What is the significance of Jesus calling Himself the Good Shepherd? Shepherds were very common in the land of Jesus' time. A

shepherd could have hundreds or thousands of sheep under his care. Sheep without a shepherd were vulnerable prey for predators, such as wolves and thieves. If a sheep strayed from the fold it could easily get lost, fall into a ravine, or become injured. Shepherds had to keep a constant watch over their folds by day and by night. That is why shepherds had to literally live with their sheep so they could lead them out to good pasture for grazing during the day and bring them to a safe place at night for rest and shelter. Shepherds got to know their sheep well and kept a careful count each evening. They also called their sheep by name so the sheep could recognize the shepherd's voice when he called them to follow him.

God used the image of a shepherd to describe His covenant relationship and care for His chosen people who were called by His Name (Psalm 80:1 and 100:3). God called David, who shepherded his father's flock in his youth, to be the anointed king and shepherd for his people Israel (Ezekiel 37:24). Jesus, God's anointed Messiah and King, born from the tribe of David, called Himself the Good Shepherd of the people whom His Father had entrusted to his care (John 10:29).

Peter the Apostle tells us that the Lord Jesus is the *Good Shepherd and Guardian of our souls* (1 Peter 2:25). He keeps a close and personal watch over every one of His sheep - His followers (disciples) who belong to Him. He calls each of us personally by name to follow Him. And he promises to be our guardian and protector from the snares of our enemy, Satan, the father of lies and a murderer from the beginning (John 8:44). The Lord leads us each day to good pastures - places where we can feed on His word and drink from the well-springs of living water which is His Holy Spirit (John 7:38-39, John 4:14). If we feed on His word and drink from the living water of the Holy Spirit, we will find the nourishment and strength we need to live each day for His glory and honor.

The Lord Jesus wants to draw each of us close to himself. He wants us to be united with him and the Father. That is why he teaches us to pray to our Father in heaven and to ask for his kingdom to reign in our lives (Matthew 6:9-10). The Lord Jesus knocks on the door of our hearts and homes (Revelation 2:20) and waits for our response.

- *Will you answer his call and welcome his presence with you? Do you recognize the voice of your Shepherd and Guardian who calls to you each day? How secure is your faith and trust in God?*

CLOSING PRAYER

Leader: In closing let us now pray together:

ALL: Lord Jesus, you have the words of eternal life. Open my ears to hear your voice and to follow your ways. Give me understanding that I may grow in the knowledge of your great love and wisdom for my life. Amen.

Leader: (if time, let us offer up our intercessions ... St. Michael... Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory Be...)

[Opening reflection was shared from St. Paul Center at <https://stpaulcenter.com/studies-tools/sunday-bible-reflections>]

[video can be found at FORMED.ORG "Opening the Word". Additional reflections can be found at FORMED in "Opening the Word"]

[Discussion questions created by Fr Frank Bird sm, Marist Priest, and distributed by www.maristlaitynz.org, were shared with permission from www.livingtheword.org.nz.]

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