

4th Sunday of Easter – Cycle A (Good Shepherd Sunday)

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Acts 2:14, 36B41

Today we continue with Peter's address to the people on the Day of Pentecost – an address we began to hear last week. This address proclaims that Jesus of Nazareth, whom the Jews crucified, is the Messiah promised by God and eagerly awaited by the righteous of the Old Testament; it is He who has affected God's saving plan for mankind.

14 Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice, and proclaimed to them,

Recall last week and again notice the change worked in Peter by the Holy Spirit: He preaches boldly whereas only some 50 days earlier he had trembled at the words of a servant girl. Peter is speaking for all the apostles.

“You who are Jews, indeed all of you staying in Jerusalem. Let this be known to you, and listen to my words. ³⁶ Therefore let the whole house of Israel know for certain

The “ingathering of Israel” has reached a decisive pass, and that Israel which now remains obstinate in rejecting Jesus will have lost its claim to the honorific title and status of God's people.

that God has made him both Lord and Messiah,

This sums up our reading of last week, all the events and actions involving Jesus were the result of divine intervention because of God's plan for His people. This summation perfectly coordinates the Lordship testimonies of Joel 3 and Psalm 110 with the Messianic argument of Psalm 16. These presentations were made by Peter to the crowd in Acts 2:32-35 which occurs between last week's reading and this one.

this Jesus whom you crucified.”

This is not a condemnation of the Jews – Peter has already stated in his address (Acts 2: 23) *“This man, delivered up by the set plan and foreknowledge of God, you killed, using lawless men to crucify him”*. They were instruments of God's will and decree; a part of His plan.

³⁷ Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart,

Peter's words, the instrument used by God's grace, have moved the hearts of His listeners.

and they asked Peter and the other apostles, “What are we to do, my brothers?”³⁸ Peter (said) to them, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you,

To repent is to turn away from sin (the rejection of Jesus as Messiah in the case of the Jews, idol worship in the case of pagans). Repentance is a positive concept, a change of mind and heart toward God reflected in the actual goodness of one’s life. It is in accord with the apostolic teaching derived from Jesus (Acts 2:24). Baptism results in the forgiveness of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit. Luke presents baptism in Acts as the expected response to the apostolic preaching about Jesus and associates it with the conferring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5; 10:44-48; 11:16).

in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit.

This does not necessarily mean that this was the form of words which the Apostles used in the baptismal liturgy, rather than the Trinitarian form prescribed by Jesus in Matthew 28:19. The expression “baptized in the name of Christ” means becoming a member of Christ, becoming a Christian.

³⁹ For the promise is made to you and to your children

The promise of the forgiveness of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit was made in the first instance to the Jews: it is they to whom God entrusted His oracles; theirs was the privilege to receive the Old Testament and to be preached to directly by Jesus Himself.

and to all those far off,

The Gentiles

whomever the Lord our God will call.”⁴⁰ He testified with many other arguments, and was exhorting them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.”

Not only that part of the Jewish People who rejected Christ and His teaching, but everyone who is estranged from God.

⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand persons were added that day.

At the sin of the golden calf, when the priesthood of the family was abolished in favor of the Levitical priesthood, three thousand were slain (Exodus 32:28) – now the Levitical priesthood is abolished and the priesthood of the family of God is instituted and three thousand are added to that family.

2nd Reading – 1 Peter 2:20b-25

In last week's epistle reading we heard Peter's call to be holy because we have been redeemed, not with money like the Old Testament sacrifice, but by the Blood of Christ; the one perfect sacrifice which could open heaven and make it possible for us to have our sins forgiven and forgotten. Today's reading comes from the section of Peter's letter concerning the behavior of Christian slaves. Neither Peter nor Paul, even though they were apostles in the just emerging Christian Church, tried to put an end to the institution of slavery. They aimed instead at giving slavery a Christian meaning and making it a part of one's spiritual being. Our reading today is commonly understood to be part of a primitive Christian hymn based on Isaiah 53:4-12.

20b But if you are patient when you suffer for doing what is good, this is a grace before God.

To put this verse in context, we must read the preceding two and one-half verses: *"¹⁸ Slaves, be subject to your masters with all reverence, not only to those who are good and equitable but also to those who are perverse. ¹⁹ For whenever anyone bears the pain of unjust suffering because of consciousness of God, that is a grace. ^{20a} But what credit is there if you are patient when beaten for doing wrong?"*

21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps.

Not following in His footsteps to slavery, but to the patient suffering of unjust wrongs, for Christ provided us all a perfect example of this.

"Be sure to note carefully the extent to which Peter beholds glory even in the state of slavery, by saying that those who do well and are blameless but who are beaten by cruel and dishonest masters, are following in the footsteps of Christ, who suffered unjustly on our behalf. That is something to rejoice about!" [Saint Bede the Venerable (ca. A.D. 416), *On 1 Peter*]

22 "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth."

This begins the hymn referred to in the introduction (read [Isaiah 53:4-12](#)).

23 When he was insulted, he returned no insult; when he suffered, he did not threaten; instead, he handed himself over to the one who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body upon the cross,

Literally, "... to the wood". "Wood" or "tree" is a very early term for the cross. Christ carried the sins of men up to the cross in His body, undergoing the "curse" for them. The "curse" is the result of breaking the covenant with God. Adam and Eve had broken their covenant with God; the Israelites, at Mount Sinai, had broken their covenant with God and had

brought the “curse” upon themselves and their descendants. It was on the cross that Jesus fulfilled the role of the suffering servant (see Galatians 3:13; Deuteronomy 21:23). 2nd Corinthians 5:21 says “*For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.*” Christ is acknowledged as sinless (verse 22 of our reading today; Hebrews 4:15) yet through God’s choice He came to stand in that relation to God which is normally the result of sin – He became part of a sinful humanity so that His sacrifice would open heaven and allow our sins to be forgiven (see Romans 6:10-12).

“Christ was nailed to the cross, paying the penalty not for His own sins but paying the debt of our nature. For our nature was in debt after transgressing the laws of its maker. And since it was in debt and unable to pay, the Creator Himself in His wisdom devised a way of paying the debt. By taking a human body as capital, He invested it wisely and justly in paying the debt and thereby freeing human nature.” [Theodoret of Cyr (ca. A.D. 430), *On Divine Providence*, 10,26]

so that, free from sin, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵ For you had gone astray like sheep, but you have now returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

The familiar shepherd and flock figures express the care, vigilance, and love of God for His people in the Old Testament [Psalm 23 (our Responsorial Psalm); Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 23:4-5; Ezekiel 34:11-16] and of Jesus for all humanity in the New Testament [Matthew 18:10-14; Luke 15:4-7; John 10:1-16 (our gospel reading); Hebrews 13:20].

Gospel - John 10:1-10

Today’s reading takes place about four months before Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection. This discourse appears immediately after Jesus’ healing of the man blind from birth (4th Sunday in Lent, Cycle A). Recall that at the end of that story, Jesus was addressing the Pharisees who didn’t think they were blind – He still addresses the Pharisees.

¹ “Amen, amen, I say to you,

The doubled Amen, when used in John, is an indication that a very grave matter is being discussed – a matter of life and death.

whoever does not enter a sheepfold through the gate but climbs over elsewhere is a thief and a robber. ² But whoever enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens it for him, and the sheep hear his voice,

The gatekeeper of the fold and the sheep can easily distinguish the genuine shepherd from the intruder.

as he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

This method of herding sheep is still in use in Palestine today. Rather than being driven, the sheep are led by the shepherd.

4 When he has driven out all his own, he walks ahead of them, and the sheep follow him, because they recognize his voice. 5 But they will not follow a stranger; they will run away from him, because they do not recognize the voice of strangers.”

All the sheep of the village were kept in a common fold. Each shepherd would call out his own sheep and lead them away to pasture. The sheep would not respond to anyone but their own shepherd so there was no danger in mixing the flocks at night. The Pharisees do not recognize Jesus, but the people of God, symbolized by the man born blind (John 9:1-41, 4th Sunday in Lent, Cycle A), do.

6 Although Jesus used this figure of speech, they did not realize what he was trying to tell them.

The Pharisees do not recognize Jesus, but the people of God, symbolized by the man born blind [John 9:1-41 (4th Sunday in Lent, Cycle A)], do.

7 So Jesus said again, “Amen, amen, I say to you, I am the gate for the sheep.

In the first part of this reading, Jesus identified Himself as the true shepherd of God’s sheep. Now, He identifies Himself with the gate of the sheepfold. He is applying the significance of the gate as put forth in the first verse of our reading today. Those who have come to the fold through Him, the apostles and their successors, are legitimate shepherds.

8 All who came (before me) are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them.

Jesus is not condemning the leaders of God’s people appointed in the Old Testament. They were not “before” Him since they were part of the descent from God of which He is the ultimate fulfillment. Only those who come in by some way other than the gate are the interlopers and God’s sheep have recognized them as such.

9 I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.

Just as the sheep and legitimate shepherds enter the fold only through the gate, so entry is gained into God’s fold, God’s pasture, only through Jesus the Christ.

10 A thief comes only to steal and slaughter and destroy;

Ezekiel 34 castigates the leaders of the people as bad shepherds who fatten themselves at the cost of the sheep.

I came so that they might have life

John 1:4 says *“through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race”*.

and have it more abundantly.

John 1:16 says *“From his fullness we have all received, grace in place of grace”*.

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