

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER – A

This Sunday is called Good Shepherd Sunday from the gospel reading where Jesus says, 'I am the gate of the sheepfold' and in the verse following our reading we have another of the 'I am' statements, 'I am the good shepherd.' This teaches us that the risen Christ is not like some herdsman driving his herd but a shepherd leading his flock with love and care, and we are invited to follow Christ, our shepherd. This first reading continues Peter's homily on Pentecost day and we hear how a great number were received into the Church. The second reading continues the theme of the shepherd who suffered and left an example which attracted us back 'to the shepherd and guardian of our souls.'

The **First Reading** is from Acts of the Apostles. This New Testament book is part two of a history of the rise of Christianity, the first part being the gospel according to Luke. They became separated when, about 150 A.D., Christians wanted the four gospel accounts bound together in one volume. The author, Luke, is a Syrian from Antioch, a doctor of non-Jewish origin, who was a close friend of Paul accompanying him on his second and third missionary journeys. Luke collected a great deal of evidence from a variety of sources which he edited. The book deals with the primitive Jerusalem community under Peter's leadership, the spread of Christianity to Samaria, to the gentile peoples and the early days of Christianity in Antioch. From chapter 13 Luke deals with Paul's three missionary journeys and ends with Paul a prisoner in Rome.

In the reading, 2.14,36-41, we have the opening words and the closing words of Peter's address on Pentecost day and the account of the first conversions. If you have time read the whole of chapter two and you will have the background to the first conversions. Notice Peter is with the eleven, Judas has been replaced and Peter speaks as leader of the apostolic body. His speech takes the form of a Jewish sermon commenting in turn on three texts of scripture and applying them to the present situation. He ends his address with certainty 'that the Lord and Christ whom God has made is this Jesus whom you crucified.' The people want to know what to do. Peter gives the reply given at the end of all apostolic discourses, 'You must repent.' With forgiveness comes baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit, a promise made by God for the Jewish people 'and all those who are far away,' a quote from the prophet Isaiah meaning the Gentile peoples, that is us. Peter concludes his speech insisting on repentance which is followed by baptism and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as Jesus had promised.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 22 is not really in response to the first reading but is linked to the gospel reading about the good shepherd. The psalm speaks of those who listen to and follow God's word for the 'Lord is my shepherd,' an act of faith in itself and the sheep when they hear the shepherd's voice follow him. The psalm shows God's care for those who follow him. In the first two stanzas the Lord is a shepherd leading along the path to salvation; in the third stanza the Lord is the host at the messianic banquet, the Jewish idea of heaven where the Lord welcomes me anointing my head with oil, the last stanza repeats the confidence found in the earlier verses 'in the Lord's own house shall I dwell for ever and ever.'

The **Second Reading** is from the first letter of St Peter. This is one of the 'universal' letters or Catholic Epistles which are addressed to the whole Church rather than to one particular community like the Pauline letters. The letter is attributed to Peter because his name is mentioned in the opening verse of the letter but his authorship is still unproven. He writes from Rome (Babylon 5.13) to the churches of Asia Minor (Turkey). The purpose of the letter is to help its readers' faith in time of trial Christians must suffer patiently like Christ in time of trial. The letter is also a valuable summary of apostolic theology. The reading, 2.20-25, takes up the purpose of the readers' faith in time of trial. 'Merit in the sight of God is bearing patiently when you are punished after doing your duty.' In doing this we are following the example of Christ 'he was insulted and did not retaliate' and 'through his wounds you have been healed.' All are called to imitate the holiness of God. It is by loving others that the Christian imitates this holiness, is distinguished from the gentiles and becomes a child of God. Keeping with the theme of the good shepherd you, like sheep gone astray, must return to him 'the shepherd and guardian of your souls.' In this section the letter is addressed to Christian slaves and their obligations to their masters.