

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER - C

This Sunday is usually known as Good Shepherd Sunday because the gospel reading is always from chapter ten of John's gospel where Jesus teaches about himself as the Good Shepherd, 'I am the Good Shepherd.' The whole chapter merits our reading and perhaps the climax of the chapter is reached in the last line of our reading today, 'The Father and I are one.' His Jewish audience do not miss the implication of these words and they fetched stones to stone Jesus because he claims equality with God. In the first reading we continue with Acts but now we have left the nascent Church in and around Jerusalem and listen to one episode in Paul's first missionary journey. The second reading continues with the book of Revelation and a vision of those who have suffered persecution for their faith but now 'God will wipe away all tears from their eyes,' an encouragement for those who have yet to suffer.

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.

The reading, 7.14,43-52, is from Paul's first missionary journey. With the blessing of the Holy Spirit Paul and Barnabas are sent by the Church from Antioch. They preach across the island of Cyprus and then head for the southern coast of present day Turkey to what was then Pamphylia and they travelled to another Antioch in Pisidia (our reading begins here) where they went into the synagogue and Paul explained how Jesus fulfilled all the promises God made to their ancestors. After the meeting many followed Paul's preaching. On the next Sabbath, the news of Paul having gone round, 'almost the whole town assembled to hear the word of God.' The Jewish population out of jealousy tried to discredit Paul and Barnabas but they spoke out boldly and many pagans rejoiced to hear their message but Paul and Barnabas were eventually expelled from the city.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 99.1-3,5, is one of a series of psalms (92-99) praising the kingship of Yahweh. This psalm was possibly recited on entering the sanctuary to offer communion sacrifices. The meaning of the words of the psalm are evident the penultimate line being an ancient refrain.

The **Book of the Apocalypse** (Greek) or **Revelation** (English) is a revelation of hidden things, particularly of hidden events in the future. The authors of apocalyptic writings may be considered the successors of the prophets; they heard the Word of God and passed it on by word of mouth, whereas apocalyptic writers were given revelation in a dream and passed it on in writing. The language of this writing is richly symbolic and the importance of the visions which are described is never in their immediate literal meaning. The imagery must be appreciated at its true value and we must do our best to translate the symbols back into the ideas which the author intended them to convey. This type of writing became very popular in the two centuries before Christ, the visions of Ezekiel and Zechariah paving the way, and was fully developed by 165 BC when the prophet Daniel was written. The authorship was attributed to John, the apostle, by writers in the West, while those in the East did not hold this view. The book is dated about 95 AD with parts written at the end of the sixties AD. The book is first and foremost a tract for the times, a period of disturbance and bitter persecution, to increase the hope and determination of the infant Church. This hope is based on the belief in the great 'Day of Yahweh' spoken of by the prophet Amos 5.18. The 'Day' is coming soon when God will liberate his people from their oppressors. When John wrote the Church had been decimated by persecution, Rome and its empire (the Beast) was only a tool wielded by Satan. The book portrays the basic realities on which faith relies in any period of history; God's promise to be with his people. It is this presence that has now been perfected by the marriage of God and his new chosen people in the person of his Son, Immanuel (God-with-us). The promise of the risen Christ, 'I am with you always; yes, to the end of time,' is what gives life to the Church.

The reading, 7.9,14-17, is of another vision of John who sees 'the people who have been through the great persecution.' This is an encouragement for those still to suffer persecution as the gospel says 'anyone who stands firm to the end will be saved.' They will 'stand in front of God's throne....and God will wipe away all tears from their eyes.' Even though we rejoice in the Resurrection it does mean that we have been released from sharing in Christ's sufferings. We owe much to these early martyrs in the Church for standing firm and enabling the Good News to be passed on to the next generation and so on to us today.