

This Sunday's Readings – the 4th Sunday of Easter – This Sunday has also been designated by the Pope as “World Day of Prayer for Vocations”. In both of his works, his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, Luke emphasizes the universality of Christianity. The Good News and salvation of Our Lord is meant to be spread to all peoples, Jews and Gentiles alike.

Today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles is a continuation of last Sunday's reading from Acts. It is the conclusion of Peter's Pentecost sermon. Here, he boldly proclaims that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah “whom you crucified”. As in last week's reading from Acts, Peter is not condemning the Israelites for killing Jesus and that is quite evident in the response of the people. “They were cut to the heart.” They were repentant and asked Peter “what are we to do”. Peter simply responded, “repent and be baptized”. Peter also states that baptism is open to all people. During this season of Easter, baptism figures very prominently. The sprinkling rite at the beginning of Mass reminds us of our baptism, whether we were baptized as an infant or as an adult. The responsorial psalm is taken from Psalm 23, The Lord, Shepherd and Host. In the 2nd reading from the First Letter of Peter, Jesus is referred to as the shepherd.

Today's Gospel reading from John vividly portrays Jesus as the Good Shepherd. It is an extremely powerful reading that is a continuation of Chapter 9, The Man Born Blind (Gospel reading from the 4th Sunday of Lent). Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* explains the structure of this reading – “There is a long and complicated history behind the discourse of the Good Shepherd. It begins with a fusion of two parables (vv. 1-3a and 3b-5). In the first parable the picture is of a sheepfold into which two parties seek to enter—a prowler and the shepherd himself. The second parable concerns the relationship between the sheep and the shepherd on the one hand, and the stranger on the other. The combined parables are followed by an allegorical interpretation in which the Johannine Christ successively identifies himself with the gate and the shepherd. Today New Testament scholars would regard the two parables as originally separate and possibly authentic parables of Jesus. The fusion must have happened in oral transmission, while the allegorical interpretation would be the work of the evangelist himself. The first parable is a challenge to Israel's religious authorities. Will they accept Jesus' message? This challenge must belong to the final part of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem. In the second parable, the situation is earlier in Jesus' ministry. He can offer no external credentials for his authority, but there are those who respond in faith to his message because they hear in it the authentic voice of God. In the last analysis, both identifications of Jesus—gate and shepherd— make the same point. The risen Christ is the One who nourishes his people in his word and sacraments, giving them life and enabling them to have it abundantly”. In this first 10 verses of the Good Shepherd discourse, Jesus describes in detail how a shepherd knows his sheep and the sheep know their shepherd. The sheep will not follow a stranger. All who recognize and follow Jesus will be saved. As Jesus said – “I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly”. Note John's use of the term “I am”. That term is used throughout John's gospel. Remember when God called Moses to Mt. Sinai and Moses asked God His name, God responded “I am who am” (Exodus 3:14). It was a term that no mortal could ever say upon penalty of death. Only God could say that. In this reading Jesus

says: “**I am** the gate”. He is saying that He is God and the Pharisees still did not see the light.

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* explains what it means to be a shepherd in Jesus’ time – “In today’s gospel, Jesus begins by describing a scenario concerning raising sheep in first-century Palestine. Then he applies the scenario to himself and his ministry.

THE SCENARIO

Jesus . . . carefully spells out the characteristics of an honorable shepherd.

(1) He enters by the door instead of sneaking in some other way.

(2) The gatekeeper recognizes him as the genuine shepherd of this flock and permits him to enter. Others would be barred.

Recalling the large, extended nature of the Middle Eastern family, even the gatekeeper role makes sense. Each family had its own flock, but pasturing their flocks together required a common pen where they might be kept. One kinsperson who knew all the shepherds was designated gatekeeper.

(3) He leads the sheep in and out.

This characteristic is more difficult to appreciate. People who raise sheep insist that shepherds do not lead sheep. They rather walk behind and urge them forward thus being able to keep an eye out for wayward stragglers. However, in the Middle East, some shepherds walk before the sheep and call them with a peculiar cry. It is this cry rather than simply voice recognition that guides the sheep. Sheep in general are not very powerful, hence unable to defend themselves effectively. Moreover, they are not very good at recognizing localities, which explains why they can so easily go astray. When lost, the sheep panics. It falls to the ground and bleats loudly in hopes that it will attract the shepherd. All this information and imagery is familiar and clear to the disciples, but they fail to grasp the point Jesus wants to make. Who is the honorable person and who is the thief, bandit, and stranger? He must explain it to them.

THE APPLICATION

At the implicit level, Jesus seems to be attacking the Jerusalem priests and the Pharisees. Leading sheep in and out echoes the symbolic description of Joshua in [Numbers 27:16-17](#). Moses is urged to “appoint someone over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep without a shepherd.” The leaders of Jesus’ time are not doing this (see [Mark 6:34](#)). At the explicit level, Jesus identifies himself as the gate. This image, however, is interpreted in two senses. In verse 8, Jesus notes that any *shepherd* who approaches the sheep other than through him (the gate) is a

thief and bandit. In verses 9-10, Jesus is the gate through which the *sheep* must pass to gain life, salvation. This interpretation fits the parable in verses 1-3a rather clumsily; it must have been torn from a different setting ([Psalm 118:20](#); see [John 14:6](#)). To find pasture is to find life. Sheep who seek pasture through Jesus find life, life in abundance (v. 10). The thief can offer only theft, destruction, and death. Such a shepherd contrasts starkly with Jesus the gate and the noble shepherd, the figure to which Jesus turns attention in the subsequent section. If contemporary American believers can see beyond the sheep imagery to the question of leadership in the Christian community, today's few verses should stimulate healthy reflection.

Are contemporary leaders noble guides or more like thieves, bandits, and strangers?"

Joe Juelich, Liturgy Team