

4 Easters Year B Readings and Commentary

Celebration Summary by Dave Pitt: Today's readings are seemingly disparate in their description of the shepherd, the cornerstone, and us, as God's children. They all, however, articulate the message that Christ is the source of our salvation. Peter proclaims the message of today's psalm, that "there is no salvation through anyone else" except for Christ, the cornerstone. John describes Jesus as the good shepherd, who "lay[s] down [his] life," in the certainty of the resurrection, by which we are all saved. And because of God's love for us, the Father sent his only Son among us, so that we might "be called children of God" not by adoption, but through a change of substance, for "we shall be like him." God thus promises the restoration of the created order; we who were made in the "image of God" are made more completely in God's image through Christ. Thus, what is accomplished in Christ will be accomplished in us as well.

This reality seems to suggest dazzling possibilities regarding our contribution to the liberation and restoration of the world. Through baptism we are commissioned to act as Christ in the world - priest, prophet, and king. Yet the metaphors of Christ as cornerstone and shepherd entail a rather unflattering portrait of us. If Christ is the cornerstone, then we are the rocks - living stones, perhaps, but nonetheless, rocks. And if Jesus is the Good Shepherd, then we are sheep: stubborn, uncomprehending and easily misled. We, ourselves, are incapable of providing a firm foundation or leading ourselves. Peter clarifies that our accomplishments are, first and foremost, the accomplishments of Christ. Thus, for our ministry to be fruitful we must acknowledge our reliance upon Christ. We are vessels, through which the love and salvation of Christ is poured out.

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First Reading Acts 4:8-12

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles

Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said:

"Leaders of the people and elders:

If we are being examined today
about a good deed done to a cripple,
namely, by what means he was saved,
then all of you and all the people of Israel should know
that it was in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean
whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead;
in his name this man stands before you healed.

He is *the stone rejected by you, the builders,
which has become the cornerstone.*

There is no salvation through anyone else,
nor is there any other name under heaven
given to the human race by which we are to be saved."

The word of the Lord.

Commentary Acts 4:8-12 by Tom Conry: In this episode, Peter and John have just been arrested by the Temple authorities, the elite group that had carved out a generous living for themselves by collaborating with the Roman occupying forces. They are charged with two offenses: they have preached in the Temple and they have advocated a belief in the resurrection of the dead (4:2).

The flavor of Peter's speech here depends on two literary devices, obscured for us in our English translation, but obvious to a second or third century audience.

First of all, Peter answers the accusations as would any good advocate, that is, by changing the subject. Peter construes the charge to explain how he healed the man lame from birth, and boldly declares that this man was healed (actually "saved" 4:9) by the power of Jesus' name. It helps to know that the verb "to save" is politically charged, usually reserved for gods, emperors, and generals. To use it here in the midst of a trial for, in effect, seditious subordination, would have given Luke's audience a good laugh. Peter hammers home this effect by publicly accusing the accusers of partnering with the Romans to have Jesus crucified and declaring that only in the name of this executed criminal would anyone be saved (4:12). This is just the kind of raising-of-stakes and wordplay that would have delighted Luke's addressees.

Second, and even more deliciously subversive, the uneducated Peter's speech is given in a high and precise rhetoric, one that is conspicuously more formal than the narrative that surrounds it. In fact, Luke imbues all of Peter's speeches in Acts with the style of speech that only a trained orator could deliver. Through the power of the spirit, the Galilean fisherman is smarter than his judges.

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Responsorial Psalm Psalm 118:1, 8-9, 21-23, 26, 28, 29

✠(22) The stone rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone.

Or:

✠Alleluia.

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his mercy endures forever.

It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to trust in man.

It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to trust in princes.

I will give thanks to you, for you have answered me
and have been my savior.
The stone which the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.
By the LORD has this been done;
it is wonderful in our eyes.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD;
we bless you from the house of the LORD.
I will give thanks to you, for you have answered me
and have been my savior.
Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his kindness endures forever.

Commentary Psalm 118:1, 8-9, 21-23, 26, 28, 29 by Tom Conry: The "hosanna" in verse 25 bears special mention. It is most familiar to us from the quotations of this verse in the gospels (Mk 9:11;11:9f; Matt. 21:9 twice; Jn 12:13) when Jesus' procession enters Jerusalem. The context of Psa. 118 makes it clear that hosanna is not a cry of praise like "alleluia" but rather is a petition – probably a traditional cry for rain and fertility from the Sukkoth post-harvest festival. Here and in the gospels it has the force of "come and save us now!" The translation of verse 27 (conspicuously omitted from today's lectionary citation) is problematic, but likely refers to a ritual dance involving the community's circling around the altar, as in Psa 26:6. The verse appears to call for ropes being attached to the horns of the altar with the group holding on, singing, and ringing about.

As with Psa 22, the suffering of the individual in the song was often interpreted in the early church as relating to Jesus. Besides the rather general nature of the text, which could be applied to a variety of different situations (think Amazing Grace for a modern analogue) the performance aspect of the psalm, i.e. the back-and-forth singing of the individual and the community, made it easy to think of the relationship of Jesus and the group. God's vindication of the one who has suffered and faced death has made it possible for the whole community to imagine its future.

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Second Reading 1 John 3:1-2
A reading from the first Letter of Saint John

Beloved:

See what love the Father has bestowed on us
that we may be called the children of God.

Yet so we are.

The reason the world does not know us
is that it did not know him.

Beloved, we are God's children now;
what we shall be has not yet been revealed.

We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him,
for we shall see him as he is.

The word of the Lord.

Commentary 1 John 3:1-2 by John Paul Heil: Main Theme: We are now
GOD'S CHILDREN destined to see and be like God in the future.

We are invited to appreciate the tremendous love that God as our Father has bestowed on us. It is a love that allows us to be called the very "children of God"--members of God's very own family, children of God our Father. This love has been bestowed on us in the death and resurrection of Jesus, as alluded to in today's reading from the Gospel of John. Jesus as the "good shepherd" laid down his life for us, the "sheep," so that we can live the very life of God now--eternal life--as God's children. But just as the evil "world" did not recognize or see the presence of God in Jesus--that Jesus was the "Son" of God, so it does not recognize or see that we are now "children" of God. And so we can expect the same sort of difficulties, rejection, and hostility in living as God's children that Jesus experienced as God's Son. Although we are already God's children now, we are destined for an even greater glory in the future when God is fully revealed in Christ at the end of time. And so let us celebrate and be glad, as we, the children of God, look forward in joyful hope to seeing and being like the God present in the risen and glorified Son of God--Jesus Christ.

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Gospel Acclamation John 10:14

Alleluia, alleluia.

I am the good shepherd, says the Lord;
I know my sheep, and mine know me.

Gospel John 10:11-18

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John

Jesus said:

"I am the good shepherd.

A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

A hired man, who is not a shepherd
and whose sheep are not his own,
sees a wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away,
and the wolf catches and scatters them.
This is because he works for pay and has no concern for the sheep.
I am the good shepherd,
and I know mine and mine know me,
just as the Father knows me and I know the Father;
and I will lay down my life for the sheep.
I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.
These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice,
and there will be one flock, one shepherd.
This is why the Father loves me,
because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.
No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own.
I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again.
This command I have received from my Father."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Lectionary for Mass in the Dioceses of the United States of America, volume I Copyright © 1970, 1997, 1998 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, D.C. All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Commentary John 10:11-18 by Tom Conry: There are two general categories of meaning surrounding the idea of the shepherd as metaphor in the ancient world. The first is good, and it is often applied to kings. Shepherds are responsible for protecting the sheep, making sure they are fed, and guaranteeing their fertility. This is pretty much the job description of a king in ancient Mesopotamia. The rulers of that region, including the legendary Gilgamesh and the famous lawgiver Hammurabi, were described as shepherds. In Judaism, Moses was a shepherd when he had the vision of the burning bush; this time of shepherding in the wilderness is a popular theme in later Jewish literature. For example, one story in the Mishnah has Moses searching out a lost kid and being told by God that he (Moses) will lead Israel. Ezekiel and Jeremiah denounce kings of Israel who are bad shepherds, who do not live up to what a shepherd is supposed to do. Of course, even God is named as a shepherd in psalms 23 and 80.

On the other hand, by the time of Jesus real shepherds were a despised minority. First century shepherds were perceived as being ritually unclean, and they had a reputation as shifty and dishonest. Jesus' opening line in the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15: "which of you, having a hundred sheep")

would doubtless be understood as profoundly insulting to the Pharasaic crowd, who were well-known for their concerns over ritual purity. This lowly and marginal status gives a special, delicious flavor to Luke's portrayal of the heavenly army's announcement of Jesus' birth to shepherds.

Both of these meanings are in play in today's reading. The audience of John's parable would certainly enjoy the irony of Jesus, the light of the world, as a shepherd. On the other hand, Jesus is also being described as a king, a politically charged idea in the midst of the Roman occupation. It provides context to Pilate's question (19:33): are you the king of the Judeans?

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