

“My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. No one can take them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one can take them out of the Father’s hand. The Father and I are one.”

Background:

The fourth Sunday of Easter is known as Good Shepherd Sunday. John 10:1-21 describes Jesus as a good shepherd. The Gospel text for this Sunday is preceded by that description of Jesus and a short description of Jesus in Solomon’s Portico where some Jews confronted him asking that he state plainly if he is the messiah. (John 10:22-24)

This short text presents an image of Jesus’ relationship to His Father and his relationship with His followers. The text that the church selects for reflection this Sunday only hints at the turmoil that is apparent in the rest of the chapter. As Jesus has taught over time about his relationship to God, he has used a variety of images. At other points in John’s Gospel, he has spoken of himself as: bread for the world (Jn 6:35), the light of the world (Jn 9:5), and the good shepherd (Jn 10:11). The Jews have asked Jesus repeatedly to clarify who he is and his relationship to God.

Jesus has also performed some miracles. He has: changed a large amount of water into wine (Jn 2:1-12), fed a multitude with five loaves (Jn 6:1-15), and cured a number of people including a man who was blind from birth (Jn 9:1-41).

He has also done some things that would be unthinkable for the people of his day. These include: driving out merchants from the temple (2:13-17); engaging a Samaritan woman in conversation (4:4-42); and refusing to condemn a woman who was caught in the act of adultery (8:1-11).

In the early part of his Gospel, John portrays Jesus’ ministry as being the center of controversy. As early as the end of the second chapter, John states that Jesus needed no one to give him testimony about human nature. He was well aware of what was in each person’s heart (Jn 2:25). In chapter 5, John states that there were Jews who wanted to kill Jesus (Jn 5:18). The things that Jesus had said and done were troubling for the Jewish leaders.

Jesus uses the image of sheep and shepherd to describe his relationship with his true followers. Sheep were held in high esteem in this culture because they did not cry out in pain but quietly accepted their fate. When a male child reached puberty, he left the care of his mother and the community of the women, and he entered the male-based society under the care of his father. His father and the other men of the community were responsible to teach him the qualities necessary to be an adult male in their society. The young boys/men were expected to faithfully and without complaint carry out the tasks given him. Physical pain and punishment were essential elements to develop the toughness needed for daily life. The developing boys were to be like sheep, who, when they were sheared each spring and eventually slaughtered, seemed to submit to their fate without bleating. Because of this quality, sheep became symbolic of the ideal way to live.

The shepherd at the time of Jesus was a mixed image. In the past, the Jews had used the image of the shepherd to describe their relationship to God and the ideal ruler. Psalm 23, which is used at many contemporary funerals, begins, “The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want.” Psalm 80 begins, “Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who led Joseph like a flock.” The prophet Isaiah describes the messiah as one who “... will feed his flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in his arms, and will carry them in his bosom; and gently lead those that are with young.” (Is 40:11) By the time of Jesus, shepherds had lost their status. Many allowed their sheep to graze on land belonging to other shepherds, and they would entice sheep not of their flock to follow them by imitating the voice or call of another shepherd. Also, they were not able to keep ritualistically pure, and they were not at home to protect the women and children, a major responsibility of men.

Jesus uses these familiar symbols, meaningful to the people of his day, to describe himself as the Good Shepherd, one who lives faithfully the qualities a shepherd who gives of himself tirelessly to care for the sheep entrusted to his care. The shepherd is the ideal image for Jesus, and to describe his relationship to God and his relationship to his disciples.

Reflection Questions:

1. Do you know people who seem to have a special bond with animals? How do you personally feel about those people and their relationship with animals?
2. How do those people seem to feel about how others look on their relationships with animals?
3. Do you know people who have the qualities of a “good shepherd?”
4. Do you have friends whose voice you would recognize even if you did not see them?
5. Are there also people who know the sound of your voice?
6. Jesus says in this Gospel that he has given eternal life to those who follow him. How do you respond to this statement in today’s Gospel?
7. Can you take some time now to talk with God about whatever struck you in this Gospel?

The Gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. The homepage is <https://fsc-calledtobe.org/>. The third link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click on the icon will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material will be posted on Fridays and will be available until the following Friday when the new material is posted.

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Excerpts from the readings for May 11, 2025, the Fourth Sunday of Easter

Paul and Barnabas continued on from Perga and reached Antioch in Pisidia.

On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and took their seats.

Many Jews and worshipers who were converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who spoke to them and urged them to remain faithful to the grace of God.

On the following Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.

When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and with violent abuse contradicted what Paul said. Both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said,

“It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first, but since you reject it and condemn yourselves as unworthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles.

For so the Lord has commanded us, ‘I have made you a light to the Gentiles, that you may be an instrument of salvation to the ends of the earth.’”

The Gentiles were delighted when they heard this and glorified the word of the Lord.

All who were destined for eternal life came to believe, and the word of the Lord continued to spread through the whole region. The Jews, however, incited the women of prominence who were worshipers and the leading men of the city, stirred up a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their territory. So they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them,

and went to Iconium. The disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit.

*We are his people, the sheep of his flock. Sing joyfully to the Lord, all you lands;
serve the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful song.
Know that the Lord is God; he made us, his we are; his people, the flock he tends.
The Lord is good: his kindness endures forever, and his faithfulness, to all generations.*

I, John, had a vision of a great multitude, from every nation, race, people, and tongue. They stood before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands. Then one of the elders said to me, “These are the ones who have survived the time of great distress; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. “For this reason they stand before God’s throne and worship him day and night in his temple. The one who sits on the throne will shelter them. They will not hunger or thirst anymore, nor will the sun or any heat strike them. For the Lamb who is in the center of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to springs of life-giving water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Jesus said: “My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. No one can take them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one can take them out of the Father’s hand. The Father and I are one.”

Excerpts from Acts 13:14, 43-52; Psalm 100:1-5; Revelation 7:9, 14-17; and John 10:27-30

Friends, Here are the Gospel background and reflection questions for May 11th, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. In the short Gospel from John, Jesus refers to his sheep, and to his father, and to his relationship with each. “My sheep hear my voice; I know them, they follow me, and I give them eternal life. My Father has given them to me. No one can take them out of my hand, and no one can take them out of the Father’s hand. The Father and I are one.”

The other readings also have direct references to sheep and shepherding, and to those who are worthy of eternal life. In the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Paul and Barnabas speak first to the Jews on a Sabbath in the synagogue at Antioch. On the following Sabbath, almost the whole city gathers to hear the word, and the Jews are jealous that the Gentiles are included. Paul and Barnabas explain, “It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you Jews first, but since you reject it, we now turn to the Gentiles, for so the Lord has commanded us.” Psalm 100 acclaims, “The Lord is God; he made us, we are his people, the flock he tends.” In the second reading, from Revelation, John writes, “In my vision one of the elders said to me, ‘The multitude before the throne have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. The Lamb will shelter them and shepherd them to springs of life-giving water.’”

Until the feasts of Ascension and Pentecost, our Easter season readings each Sunday are from Acts, Revelation, and John. For time context, the first reading’s scene at Antioch happens after Jesus’ ascension and after the conversion of Paul. The second reading describing John’s vision in the book of Revelation was written years after the events of the first reading. The Gospel scene occurs in the temple area in Jerusalem, with Jesus speaking to the religious leaders. After the healing of a blind man, Jesus had suggested these people are “blind.” He followed that by telling them he is the Good Shepherd. So they asked him, “If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly,” and in today’s short Gospel, he responds to that inquiry: “The Father and I are one.” There is security for believers in Jesus’ statements, “No one can take them out of my/the Father’s hand.” The flip side is this: Anyone who finds themselves outside of their protection left it by their own choosing (and is welcomed/encouraged to return).

Joe

> i < May the Word light your way each day!