

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

4th Sunday of Easter

Year C

1 May 2022



Collect

Almighty ever-living God,
lead us to a share in the joys of heaven,
so that the humble flock may reach
where the brave Shepherd has gone before.
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

There's a wonderful verse about wisdom in the book of Proverbs. Describing her role in creation, she says: "I was beside the master craftsman, delighting him day after day, ever at play in his presence" (Prov 8:30, RNJB). That phrase, "ever at play in his presence," is itself delightful. It also sheds light on what we do at liturgy. We are at play in God's presence, as liturgical pioneer Romano Guardini wrote in his celebrated book of 1918, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*.

The word of God certainly invites us to the play of our imaginations. Today's reading from that most visionary work, the Apocalypse/Revelation, stretches our minds more than once. It features a Lamb who is a shepherd, and blood that washes robes white. These seemingly self-contradictory combinations tease us to discover new insights. They save us from a narrow mindset that reduces truth and beauty to the merely factual and leaves no room for the play of grace.

Christian believers thrive in a world of fruitful tensions: the divine and the human, the "now" and the "not yet," life and death, shame and glory, to name but a few. We flourish when we are "at play in his presence."

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles 13:14, 43–52

Paul and Barnabas carried on from Perga till they reached Antioch in Pisidia. Here they went to the synagogue on the sabbath and took their seats.

When the meeting broke up, many Jews and devout converts joined Paul and Barnabas, and in their talks with them Paul and Barnabas urged them to remain faithful to the grace God has given them.

The next sabbath almost the whole town assembled to hear the word of God. When they saw the crowds, the Jews, prompted by jealousy, used blasphemies and contradicted everything Paul said. Then Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly. 'We had to proclaim the word of God to you first, but since you have rejected it, since you do not think yourselves worthy of eternal life, we must turn to the pagans. For this is what the Lord commanded us to do when he said:

I have made you a light for the nations,
so that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth.'

It made the pagans very happy to hear this and they thanked the Lord for his message; all who were destined for eternal life became believers. Thus the word of the Lord spread through the whole countryside.

But the Jews worked upon some of the devout women of the upper classes and the leading men of the city and persuaded them to turn against Paul and Barnabas and expel them from their territory. So they shook the dust from their feet in defiance and went off to Iconium; but the disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 99:1–3, 5

R. We are his people, the sheep of his flock.

or

R. Alleluia.

Cry out with joy to the Lord, all the earth.

Serve the Lord with gladness.

Come before him, singing for joy. **R**

Know that he, the Lord, is God.

He made us, we belong to him,

we are his people, the sheep of his flock. **R**

Indeed, how good is the Lord,
eternal his merciful love.

He is faithful from age to age. **R**

First Reading

Much has happened between last Sunday's story of the apostles' trial before the Sanhedrin and today's account of Paul and Barnabas' mission. Stephen has been stoned to death; Saul has been transformed; the mission to the Gentiles, revealed to Peter, has begun; James, son of Zebedee, has been put to the sword; Herod has died; and Paul and Barnabas have been sent on mission, making Cyprus their first stop. We join them today in Pisidian Antioch in what is now southern Turkey.

The reading begins with the two missionaries following their custom of connecting with the local Jewish community. It omits the lengthy address that Paul gave but picks up with the response he gets. It is worth noting that Paul "urged them to remain faithful to the grace God had given them." He was not converting them from Judaism to Christianity but preaching Christ as the fulfilment of their hopes.

But a turning point of immense significance is now reached. When the initial enthusiasm of his Jewish hearers changes to hostility, Paul determines to focus his mission on the Gentiles. He quotes from one of the Servant Songs read in Holy Week. The light will dawn on the nations and salvation will "reach the ends of the earth." From now on the gospel will know no human boundaries.

Readers who understand the pivotal importance of this episode will be keen to proclaim this reasonably long text with clarity. It's an action-packed story that invites energetic and spirited delivery.

Responsorial Psalm

Both New and Old Testaments hold a wide variety of perspectives together in a kind of fruitful tension. At times the Chosen People are instructed to guard their identity jealously and not allow it to be contaminated by contact with other nations. At other times there is a benign openness to the peoples around them. Both stances are hinted at in Psalm 99/100, a short hymn of praise for God's eternal and merciful love.

The sense of exclusiveness is captured in the response, "We are his people, the sheep of his flock." This is complemented by the expansiveness of the opening line, "Cry out with joy to God, all the earth." This global perspective aligns with Paul's realisation that the gospel is for all. Membership of the "flock of God" is open to all who put their faith in Christ.

There will be extra resonance for the psalm when the gospel is read. The fourth Sunday of Easter always features a reading from Jesus' discourse on the good shepherd (Jn 10). Being short and simple, the psalm presents no problem for the reader other than the risk of proclaiming it too quickly. It should be prayed in joyful spirit, at a pace that will allow the assembly to savour the good things it celebrates – God's faithful mercy and goodness.

A reading from the book of the Apocalypse 7:9, 14–17

I, John, saw a huge number, impossible to count, of people from every nation, race, tribe and language; they were standing in front of the throne and in front of the Lamb, dressed in white robes and holding palms in their hands. One of the elders said to me, 'These are the people who have been through the great persecution, and because they have washed their robes white again in the blood of the Lamb, they now stand in front of God's throne and serve him day and night in his sanctuary; and the One who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. They will never hunger or thirst again; neither the sun nor scorching wind will ever plague them, because the Lamb who is at the throne will be their shepherd and will lead them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away all tears from their eyes.'

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John

10:27–30

Jesus said:

The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice;
I know them and they follow me.
I give them eternal life;
they will never be lost
and no one will ever steal them from me.
The Father who gave them to me is greater than
anyone, and no one can steal from the Father.
The Father and I are one.'

Second Reading

The Lectionary passes over the doom-laden sixth chapter of the Apocalypse with its ominous seven seals and four horses of devastation. Instead we are ushered into another of the author's radiant visions of heaven. The great assembly praising God and the Lamb comes "from every nation, race, tribe and language." The first reading's references to the "nations" and "the ends of the earth," and the psalm's call to "all the earth," find glorious fulfilment here.

The vision is rich in symbolism. The Lamb brings Passover and Calvary to mind, white robes suggest baptism, palms speak of victory, the tent evokes the exodus and divine protection. The blood of the Lamb that washes robes white especially catches our attention. The atoning death of the Lamb cleanses humankind of sin. There are allusions to a new exodus free of hunger or thirst, to Ezekiel's oracle of a divine shepherd for the flock, and to Isaiah's vision of a future without sadness or death. In brief, a new creation.

All this is meant to kindle hope and courage in the hearts of those who are suffering persecution. They can see the heavenly destiny that awaits those who have been through great tribulation. Many of the biblical connotations may be lost on the assembly but a well-proclaimed reading should enable them to visualise this celestial scene and find inspiration in its promise.

Gospel

The gospel for today has been taken from the episode that follows Jesus' exposition of the shepherd theme in the tenth chapter of John. It took place, John tells us, in winter when the feast of the Dedication of the Temple was being celebrated and in the portico of Solomon. Needled by hostile authorities, Jesus responds uncompromisingly and is nearly stoned as a result. None of this is contained in the passage to be read.

The text is brief and not without controversy. At first he recapitulates earlier themes, then makes two striking claims. The first is a little ambiguous as can be seen from different translations: "The Father who gave them to me is greater than anyone" (JB) and "What my Father has given me is greater than all else" (NRSV). In his farewell discourse Jesus will simply say "the Father is greater than I" (14:28).

How this relates to Jesus' second claim is unclear. It is short, simple and emphatic: "I and the Father are one." This immediately elicits a furious reaction from the religious authorities who accuse him of blasphemy and prepare to stone him but he eludes them. For later Christian leaders, Jesus' words became a springboard for Trinitarian theological debate.

For all its brevity this reading provides much to ponder, indeed to contemplate prayerfully. Two relationships of the utmost importance are set before us. One is that between Jesus and those who believe in him, under the metaphor of shepherd and sheep. The other is that between Son and Father. Later on Jesus brings these together when he tells his disciples that he and the Father "will come to them and make their home with them" (14:23).

Blessing for Easter

May God, who by the Resurrection of his Only Begotten Son
was pleased to confer on us
the gift of redemption and of adoption,
give us gladness by his blessing.

Amen.

May he, by whose redeeming work
we have received the gift of everlasting freedom,
make us heirs to an eternal inheritance.

Amen.

And may we, who have already risen with Christ
in Baptism through faith,
by living in a right manner on this earth,
be united with him in the homeland of heaven.

Amen.

And may the blessing of almighty God,
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
come down on us and remain with us for ever.

Amen.

(Adapted from the Solemn Blessing for Easter Time, Roman Missal p 712.)