



COLLECT, READINGS AND REFLECTION
SUNDAY 25 APRIL 2021 – 4th Sunday of Easter

COLLECT

Risen Christ,
faithful shepherd of your Father's sheep:
teach us to hear your voice
and to follow your command,
that all your people may be gathered into one flock,
to the glory of God the Father.
Amen.

Psalm 23

- 1 The Lord is my shepherd; ♦
therefore can I lack nothing.

- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures ♦
and leads me beside still waters.

- 3 He shall refresh my soul ♦
and guide me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

- 4 Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil; ♦
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

- 5 You spread a table before me
in the presence of those who trouble me; ♦
you have anointed my head with oil
and my cup shall be full.

- 6 Surely goodness and loving mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life, ♦
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

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Acts 4.5-12

5 The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, 6 with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. 7 When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" 8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, 9 if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, 10 let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. 11 This Jesus is "the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' 12 There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

John 10.11-18

11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. 17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

Reflection – this week from Hannah

The Good Shepherd. Perhaps I'm making an assumption here, but it's a phrase that often conjures up bucolic, peaceful images of comfort and safety. The kindly face, the found lost-sheep over the shoulders, the aura of calm strength. It's a picture that has encouraged so many followers of Christ down the years, but this week's Gospel reading reminds us that there is more texture to this illustration than we perhaps immediately recognise, along with a growing sense of foreboding.

The question of who Jesus is has been writ large in the previous chapters- there have been healings, there have been radical words, there have been stones in the hands of those who didn't like what they heard and wanted rid of the challenge Jesus presented. The crowd is divided- some dismiss him as out of his mind; others want to know more and are unsettled (yet attracted) by what they've experienced so far. Whatever their perspective and attitude, nobody is left out of this story. There are the sheep of the fold, and the sheep that Jesus longs to bring into the pen. All of them are known, and all of them are loved. All of them have the Shepherd's attention. The mind-blowing inclusivity of Christ, who leaves nobody out, reaches a climax in that assertion that the Shepherd will go so far as to lay down his life for the sheep. Really?!

I suspect most shepherds would draw the line before that happened! If it came down to the wolf killing the shepherd or a couple of sheep, I know which I would settle for. But not so Christ; that's the wonder of it. He lays down his life for the sheep and loses none. And he chooses it freely. As we continue through the Easter season we are once again reminded that nobody forces the hand of God- God chose to die for us. The darkness that will grow as the Gospel continues, and culminate in the terrible events of Holy Week, is making its presence known even here- in the profound mingling of comfort and deep unease in a story about a shepherd who will relentlessly gather his flock, and will die rather than let them die.

We do indeed have a Good Shepherd. We all do, and we are all known and loved. Our understanding of the height, depth, length and breadth of that love grows every time we engage with this story, and the richer our understanding, the richer our appreciation of our common humanity as sheep together- every one of us. Christ calls us to follow his example; to be shepherds as well as sheep and to help one another to flourish in the fold. We glimpse that in our reading from Acts, where Peter (a rather wayward sheep who had made so many mistakes, frequently got the wrong end of the stick and abandoned his friend in his darkest hour) bore witness to Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. He was gathering sheep in the way of his Lord. We too are invited to join in, as we all follow our Good Shepherd. Shepherding a flock of sheep is not about keeping them safe and penned in- a shepherd's job is complex, balancing the freedom to risk and to 'be' sheep alongside the ultimate protection from peril. As we give thanks for our Good Shepherd, and consider how we follow him today, may the rich complexity of this passage nourish us.