

Easter 4



May 11, 2003

Prayer of the Day

God of all power, you called from death our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep. Send us as shepherds to rescue the lost, to heal the injured, and to feed one another with knowledge and understanding; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

Or

Almighty God, you show the light of your truth to those in darkness, to lead them into the way of righteousness. Give strength to all who are joined in the family of the church, so that they will resolutely reject what erodes their faith and firmly follow what faith requires; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

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."

5. *The next day*: The day after Peter and John healed a lame beggar and had been arrested by the Temple authorities.

rulers, elders, and scribes: These three groups are components of the Jerusalem Sanhedrin.

6. *Annas...Caiaphas, John and Alexander, and all who were of the high priestly family*: Annas was high priest from 6 to 15 a.d. His son-in-law, Caiaphas, was high priest from 18-36 a.d. He was the high priest when Jesus was crucified (John 11:51). John (or Jonathan) succeeded Caiaphas (36-37 a.d.). Alexander is unknown.

7. *By what power or by what name did you do this?* The question is not proclaiming the resurrection, which was the excuse for arresting them (verse 2), but curing a lame beggar.

8-12: Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit and responds to the question that was asked, "this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth." But he goes beyond that and identifies Jesus as one crucified by "you," raised by God, rejected by "you builders," and the name "by which we must be saved."

the stone that was rejected: Psalm 118:22. See Matthew 21:42 and parallels, 1 Peter 2:7.

There is salvation in no one else: "By [salvation Luke] means deliverance of human beings from evil, whether physical, political, cataclysmic, moral, or eschatological, and the restoration of them to a state of wholeness.... Other NT writers make use of it as well (Paul, John, Hebrews), but only Luke emphasizes the exclusive nature of this new mode of divine salvation." [1]

Although the reading ends here the appearance before the Sanhedrin continues. Peter and

John are admonished not to teach in the name of Jesus (4:18). Though they do not agree to obey the order of the Sanhedrin they are released. This is the first formal opposition to the apostles' preaching mentioned in Acts. The opposition rapidly escalated until there was a severe persecution of the church (8:1).

Psalm 23

{1} The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. {2} He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; {3} he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. {4} Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff-- they comfort me. {5} You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. {6} Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

In the Revised Common Lectionary, the fourth Sunday of Easter is "Good Shepherd Sunday" in all three years. The Psalm is selected to support the theme of the Gospel. It also reflects the salvatory power of Jesus which is proclaimed in Acts 4:12.

1 John 3:16-24

{16} We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. {17} How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? {18} Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. {19} And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him {20} whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. {21} Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; {22} and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. {23} And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. {24} All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

In our society and time the word "love" has lost a great deal of its meaning. When we deal with the idea of love in the Bible we really have no analog to help us understand it. Some point out the various words used in Greek to express fraternal love (*phileo*), erotic love (*eros*), and God's love (*agape*). This reading makes the whole thing quite simple: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another."

If we try to understand the ways of God they, too are very simple. God assures us of his love, and he expects us to help those in need. He has commanded us to believe in the name of his Son, and he has commanded us to love one another. When we obey his commandments, then the Spirit assures us that we abide in God, and God abides in us.

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."

"The point is that here Jesus is the good shepherd who protects his flock with the basic guarantees shepherds sought from protective deities: security, fertility, and provisions. Interestingly, these are the guarantees ancient peoples sought from their kings. Hence, kings

were readily described with shepherding metaphors, even though the job of hiring shepherd was considered very low status." [2] Rulers were frequently assumed to have a relationship similar to that of shepherd and sheep with their subjects, that is, they were to protect and care for the people, and even to lay down their life for the sake of them.

"The imagery of a shepherd protecting the flock from wolves is used elsewhere in the New Testament (Matt. 10:16; Acts 20:28-29). The effect of such language is to warn of dangers and draw boundaries. Imagery of attack from outsiders is common among socially estranged groups grappling with maintaining boundaries intact over against incursions by the surrounding society. Such imagery is especially common when a group is seeking to keep peripheral members more closely attached and to guard them from the enticements of rival groups." [3]

The question that we must ask ourselves is how shall we understand this imagery when we are a part of the dominant society, when that society gives at least lip service to Christian values, and when the estranged are estranged *from us*? How do we identify ourselves with those in danger and in need of protection, when we are often a part of the danger. As *Pogo* said, "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

Reflection

Jesus is our Good Shepherd. How nice it would be just to be sheep. Then Jesus could take care of us and we would not have to do anything. But that is not the plan. "Send us as shepherds to rescue the lost, to heal the injured, and to feed one another with knowledge and understanding." That is our prayer, and that is God's plan. Jesus is the cornerstone of our salvation. There is no other name by which we can be saved. So.... As Jesus has laid down his life for his sheep, so we are to emulate him.

Those for whom we must act as shepherds are lost and wayward sheep, as estranged from their surrounding society as we are. We must guide and guard, protect and defend these sheep. And we must be ready to do it, as Jesus did, by laying down our life. Are they worth it? Probably not! But then were we worth Jesus' life? If we would dare to be more than hirelings who run away when the wolf comes, if we are to do more than refuse to help those in need, we know that we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

Hymns [4]

With One Voice (e.g. 762v), *Hymnal Supplement* 1991 (e.g. 725s) and *LBW* (e.g. 32).

E=Entrance; D=Hymn of the Day; I=First Lesson, P=Psalm; II=Second Lesson; G=Gospel

377 --E--Lift High the
456 --D--The King of
373 --I--Eternal Ruler of

451 --P--The Lord's My
702s --P--Psalm 23: Shepherd
365, 352, 450, 742s, 196

Prayers of the People [5]

A: As a flock in constant need, we behold our risen Christ and are quick to pray "Good Shepherd, hear us" and to respond, C: Good Shepherd, help us.

A: As Christians in this community, there remains a disparate character in our traditions and practices as Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox communions. We ask that the gospel may not be obscured by our differences or thereby deplored. Good Shepherd, hear us. C: Good Shepherd, help us.

A: That we may discover the resurrected Christ in life's daily encounters with others, Good Shepherd, hear us. C: Good Shepherd, help us.

A: That terrorist activities may be curtailed and that extremist positions may give way to creative reconciliation. Good Shepherd, hear us. C: Good Shepherd, help us.

A: That those who have become part of Christ's fold through Holy Baptism may be drawn

to continued inquiry, study, and demonstration of their faith. Good Shepherd, hear us. C: Good Shepherd, help us.

When the Brief Order of Confession and forgiveness is not used, the following may be said:

A: As parents, grandparents, godparents and friends, we neglect the spiritual welfare of our children. We fail to articulate our faith in Christ verbally and in our walk. Forgive us, compassionate Lord, Good Shepherd, hear us. C: Good Shepherd, help us.

P: The glory alone is yours, O Lord. You seek us before we think of you. You receive us graciously, when we turn to you. You become the source of our encouragement. We thank and praise you for your care. C: Amen.

Or [6]

Presider or deacon

Gathered in the care of the good shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep, let us pray to God who knows our every need.

Deacon or other leader

For the holy churches in every place, and for the unity of all.

For this holy assembly and for all who gather in the name of the risen Christ.

For *NN* and all illumined by the light of Christ.

For *N* our bishop and the presbyters, the deacons and all who minister in Christ, and for all the holy people of God.

For the world and its leaders, our nation and its people.

For all those in danger and need, the sick and the suffering, the strayed and the lost.

For those who walk in death's dark valley.

For ourselves, our families, and those we love.

Remembering the blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints, let us offer ourselves and one another to the living God through Christ. **To you, O Lord.**

Presider

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, who soothes our head with oil and fills our cup with wine. Hear the prayers we offer for every need, and revive us with your Holy Spirit. Glory to you for ever and ever.

Notes

[1] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Doubleday, 1998, pp. 301f.

[2] Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998, p. 183.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 181.

[4] <http://www.worship.ca/text/wpch0203.txt>

[5] http://www.worship.ca/text/inter_b1.txt

[6] <http://members.cox.net/oplater/prayer.htm>