

One Flock, One Shepherd

Matthew Genung, S.S.D

April 21, 2024—Fourth Sunday of Easter

Readings: Acts 4.8-12; 1 John 3.1-2; John 10.11-18

On the fourth Sunday of Easter the Church hears and proclaims a gospel of a different sort than the previous three Sundays of Easter. One difference is that this reading does not recount an experience of the empty tomb or an encounter with the resurrected Lord, but regards a parable of Jesus recounted in the context of a controversy involving healing on the Sabbath during his public ministry. John 10.11-18 is one of the Johannine “I am” sayings, where Jesus identifies himself as the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd “lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10.11) “so that they might have life” (John 10.10). This passage, in the context of the Easter liturgies, proclaims the Easter message of the effects of Jesus’ paschal mystery. The shepherd metaphor, through its nuanced narration, regards the fulfillment of the prefigured new life of the one Church, both of her members and leaders, as a sharing in the divine life.

Between Two Feasts

The Gospel’s festival context can shed some first light. In John, this episode comes between the celebration of two Jewish feasts: the feast of Tabernacles (John 7.2), a celebration of the Lord’s guidance and care for Israel in the wilderness journey toward Temple communion, and Hannukah, the festival of light celebrating the renewal of Temple worship (John 10.22). Between these feasts Jesus restores sight to a man blind from birth, whose blindness is considered by some to be the result of personal sin. The leaders of the people are investigating Jesus for his work done on the Sabbath, who then accuse Jesus of the sin of breaking the Sabbath. Questions swirl around identity: who is Jesus, who is blind, and who is the true authority.

In response to these questions, Jesus relates a story or a parable about a sheepfold, its gate, and a shepherd (John 10.1-6). The parable is not understood, so Jesus proceeds to explain it. In the gospel passage of the Fourth Sunday of Easter, Jesus identifies himself as the Good Shepherd. It is the second of a two-part explanation of the parable. In the parable Jesus uses a variety of metaphors to explain the relationship between himself, his followers, and their opponents. In John 10.7-10, Jesus explains the metaphor of the gate; in John 10.11-18, he explains the metaphor of the shepherd.

In the passage where Jesus describes himself as the gate, it is clear that Jesus protects the sheep from thieves and bandits. The term for sheepfold (αὐλή), the place where one may enter only through the gate, can also indicate the courts of the Temple (Exod 27.9; Isa 1.12). The context of the Jewish festivals tells us that Jesus is referring to himself as the new Temple in which the people will worship and find salvation. There is only one gate, and that is Jesus.

The New David

The Good Shepherd is the shepherd in the parable who enters through the gate, calls the sheep that belong to him, and leads them out. Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd twice. The first time indicates that he is different from

hired shepherds who work for pay rather than concern for the sheep. The sheep do not belong to the hired man, and in the face of danger he seeks to save himself rather than the sheep. The result is that the sheep are seized and dispersed. Unlike the hired man, Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays his life down for the sheep. This is what is necessary for their salvation.

The second time Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd, he indicates the positive effects of his shepherding. Jesus knows and is known by the sheep, because they belong to him. The relationship of knowledge between Jesus and his own is analogous to the relationship of knowledge between Jesus and the Father, which is a relationship of unity (John 10.30).

In the Old Testament the shepherd is a favorite metaphor to describe the nature of God's activity in favor of his people Israel (Isa 40.11; Ps 23.1-4). It is also a common metaphor in reference to Israel's political leaders (Num 27.16-17; 1 Sam 17.34-35; Jer 23.1-2; Ps 78.70-72). In the parable of the shepherd of Ezekiel 34, to take a prime example, the leaders of Israel are accused of acting like shepherds who abuse their flock rather than caring for it. This leaves the flock dispersed. The accusation against the leaders of Israel is that by abandoning the Lord and failing to administer proper justice among his people, the Lord caused them to be exiled from their land and dispersed among other nations. In this same parable, the Lord promises to restore the scattered sheep by setting his servant David over them as his one shepherd (Ezek 34.23). When the sheep are restored to pasture in the land, they will know the Lord (Ezek 34.27), and they will know that it is the Lord himself who shepherds them (Ezek 34.30).

With this background in mind, in John 10.11,14, Jesus indicates that as the Good Shepherd, he is this new David, the one shepherd appointed over the one flock which he is restoring in himself (the gate and Temple). The restoration takes place as interpersonal knowing. Jesus knows who belongs to him, and those who belong to Jesus know him. This is because they listen to his voice and obey it (see Exod 19:5).

The Shepherd Lays Down His Life

The voice of the Lord is heard most purely in Jesus' self-sacrifice, in which his relationship with the Father and the Church is revealed in glory. In these verses the intricacies of trinitarian theology and soteriology emerge thanks to the use of repetition. Jesus refers to laying down his life for the sheep four times. He refers to the Father four times. He repeats his identity as the Good Shepherd, his action of laying down his life, and the reciprocal knowing between him and his flock. In John 10.14-15, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, promises to lay down his life for sheep who have the same interpersonal relationship as Jesus and the Father. It is through Jesus's self-sacrifice that he becomes known by his sheep in the same way as he is known by the Father.

The next verses go further, at once indicating the freedom and the power with which Jesus lays down his life and takes it up again. "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own," which is at the same time based upon a command: "This command I have received from my Father" (John 10.18), and is the "reason why the Father loves me" (John 10.17). Jesus' death and resurrection come from his obedience to the Father who commands, which has its meaning in the Father's love. "The Word did not receive the commandment by a word, but in the only-begotten Word of the Father every commandment exists" (Augustine, *Tractate* 47.14). The obedient and loving relationship of the Son and the Father is presented as reciprocal knowing. This self-sacrifice of Jesus the Good Shepherd gathers the sheep into the one flock of the One Shepherd. The unity of God and the unity of his flock are made manifest in the Good Shepherd, who is also the gate of the new Temple, the locus of worship and communion prefigured in the two feasts mentioned above.

Several of the themes of the Gospel are seen in the second reading from 1 John: the gift of the Father's love results in a new relationship, transforming believers into children of God (1 John 3.1). Believers participate in the rejection of God by being rejected themselves because, like God, they remain unknown by the world (1 John 3.2). The union of believers in Jesus the Good Shepherd integrates them into the life of God so that they experience the same misunderstanding in the world as God.

Acts 4.8-12 has several echoes of the Gospel and the second reading. In this reading, Peter is a shepherd in the Good Shepherd. He exemplifies the new life in the Spirit (Acts 4.8). He is able to do the mighty works of Jesus, and he participates in a similar rejection. For example, Peter's apology arises from being interrogated by the leaders of Israel, their shepherds, because he had healed a man crippled from birth (Acts 3.2-8). This is like the immediate occasion of Jesus' parable of the Good Shepherd, which was the interrogation of the Pharisees brought about by his restoration of

sight to the man blind from birth (John 9.1-7). Again, it is a question of authority: "By what power or by what name have you done this?" (Acts 4.7). The content of Peter's apology surrounds the question of salvation and its provenance. The unity of shepherd and flock based on the paschal mystery in the Gospel reading are echoed by Peter: "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" (Acts 4.12). Only the death and resurrection of Jesus, in the power of God, brings salvation. Peter also refers to Jesus as Christ, the Davidic messianic title, and quotes Psalm 118.22, a Hallel psalm in praise to God for his salvific deeds.

Matthew C. Genung is Ruth J. and Robert A. Conway Foundation Chair in Biblical Studies at Mount St. Mary's Seminary and School of Theology in Cincinnati, OH. His most recent publication is "The Divine Voice of Sinai in Emended Scripture" in The Word of Truth, Sealed by the Spirit: Perspectives on the Inspiration and Truth of Sacred Scripture.

For Further Reading

- Thomas Aquinas, "[*Homily VI: The Good Shepherd*](#)"
- Augustine of Hippo, "[*Tractate 48 on the Gospel of John*](#)"
- John Paul II, "[*Pastores Dabo Vobis*](#)"

In Short . . .

- *The Good Shepherd passage in John 10.11-18 concerns the fulfillment of the prophecy of restored communion of a dispersed people into new life.*
- *Jesus is the unique eschatological Davidic shepherd appointed over the one flock of God.*
- *The Johannine context of the Jewish festivals surrounding the Good Shepherd passage indicate that Jesus is the new Temple locus of communion.*
- *The unity of God and the unity of his Church are manifest in the Good Shepherd who freely lays down his life and takes it up again.*
- *The leaders and members of the Church participate in the divine life of the Good Shepherd knowing his voice and being known by him.*