Lectio Divina – 4th Sunday of Easter Year A

Contexts

John’s Gospel – in brief

* **Structure of John’s Gospel**

**1:1-18:** **Prologue** – An introduction to and summary of the career of the incarnate Word.

**1:19-12:50: Part One: The Book of Signs**: the Word reveals himself to the world and to his own, but they do not accept him.

**Chapter 6** – Jesus, the Bread of Life is right in the middle of The Book of Signs – a central text in more ways than one!

**13:1-20:31: Part Two: The Book of Glory**: To those who accept him, the Word shows his glory by returning to the Father in death, resurrection and ascension. Fully glorified, he communicates the Spirit of life.

**21:1-25: Epilogue**: Galilean resurrection appearances and second conclusion.

* It is the only Gospel to call Jesus “God”.
* Purpose of Gospel is so that those who follow Jesus might have the kind of faith that would give them eternal life, namely, the faith that Jesus was God’s only Son, possessing God’s own life and had come into the world from above that people might be given that life (and thus be begotten by God) and become God’s children. (Raymond Brown SS)
* Jesus is ‘The Bread of Life’ who feeds, nourishes and sustains the children of God.
* Remember that John’s Gospel brings together a number of Jesus traditions from a number of early Johannine communities.

John 10:1-10 – things to notice

* The gospel text is part of a longer discourse on Jesus, the Good Shepherd (10:1-42) which includes: the parable of the sheep (anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate, but gets in some other way…, Jesus, the gate of the sheepfold, Jesus, the shepherd who gives up (lay down) his life for the sheep, Jesus is rejected by the Jews: ‘Are you the Messiah? Tell us plainly!’ ‘I have told you but you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep’.
* Parable about the shepherd, the gatekeeper, the thief, the sheep (who hear and follow and recognise the shepherd’s voice).
* Note the contrasts:
  + the shepherd enters through the gate
  + the thief & brigand gets in some other way
  + the shepherd calls & the sheep respond by following him
  + the sheep do not listen to the stranger’s voice but run away
  + the shepherd leads them out
  + the sheep do not recognise the voice of the stranger and do not follow him
* The disciples do not understand the parable, so Jesus explains….
* I am the gate of the sheepfold (what sheepfold – God’s people? who are the sheep – believers in Christ?). Some commentators say that shepherds used to sleep lying across the entrance to the sheepfold, thus becoming the gate.
* All others are thieves and brigands (who are ‘all others’ – scribes & Pharisees?)
* The text presupposes a close relationship between shepherd and sheep.
* But the sheep took no notice of them (what does that mean?)
* I am the gate (dual symbol: closed to keep sheep safe, open to let sheep feed)
* Anyone who enters through me … will be safe …. will go freely in and out … will find pasture
* The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy… (but) I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full
* Is this part of John’s gospel addressing a particular problem about membership in the early Johannine communities and/or about leadership in the communities?

The Liturgical Context – why does the church choose this passage to reflect on this Sunday?

The readings of the Easter Season continue to unfold for us the great Easter Mystery - the enduring presence of Jesus among us and what ‘new life in Christ’ might mean.

The Gospel of each Sunday is always from John except for the feast of the Ascension.

Year A Gospels

The Gospel of each Sunday is always from John except for the 3rd Sunday and the feast of the Ascension.

Easter Sunday: Christ, risen from the dead

2nd Sunday: Jesus appears to the disciples & to Thomas

3rd Sunday: Jesus and the two disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke)

4th Sunday: Jesus, the Sheep-gate

5th Sunday: Christ, the way, truth & life

6th Sunday: Promise of the Spirit

Ascension: Jesus commission the eleven (Matthew)

Pentecost: Receive the Holy Spirit.

To understand why the Church chooses a particular Gospel, you need to look at the first reading, and during the Seasons (Lent, Advent, Easter & Christmas) at the second reading as well.

In the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles (written by the author of Luke’s Gospel) this Sunday, Peter gives a very persuasive speech on the day of Pentecost to ‘the crowd’ – presumably includes both Jews and Gentiles. He issues an invitation to them to believe. We are told that about 3,000 people respond and are baptised. The reading is a reminder that the sheepfold can be much bigger than we realise and include people we may not normally consider as members (sheep).

The Second Reading from the letter of St Peter talks about stray sheep returning to the shepherd and guardian of souls (Jesus) through whom, by his suffering and death, the burden of sin and guilt is lifted, we are healed and called to holiness.

So we might understand this Gospel passage as affirming that, through Jesus the gate, we are numbered among the sheep who belong to God. In and through Christ we are kept safe and led to pasture (food which enables us to grow, to stay alive), we listen to his voice (not to other voices), he knows us individually and has called us (intimacy and personal relationship).

This Sunday is often referred to as ‘Good Shepherd’ Sunday because of the reference to Jesus as the Good Shepherd in the Gospel readings which occur on the 4th Sunday of Easter Season. That is not quite so obvious in Year A as it is in B & C, but the image is a treasured one for us.

Jesus acts towards us like a good shepherd: feeding, nurturing, defending and even laying down his life for us. The good shepherd is deeply concerned about the flock. He knows each sheep by name. The love that the shepherd has for the flock comes from the Father’s love for the shepherd.

Jesus knows his sheep, they listen to his voice, they follow him, they will never be lost nor stolen from him. Like a good shepherd Jesus is the source of life, nourishment, and safety for the sheep. The final line of the Gospel proclaims the unity of the Father and Jesus. It is into this communion that we are drawn when we listen to the Shepherd’s voice. This love God has for us makes us part of God’s family. The love of God which Jesus brings is life indeed.

Any reflection about Jesus as the Good Shepherd also serves as a reminder that shepherding each other in Jesus’ name is part of the vocation of every disciple. We are very used to thinking about Jesus as the Good Shepherd, but I think we also need to think about being/becoming the ‘good sheep’ and good shepherds to each other.

Who are the shepherds in our midst today?