

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.

John 10:11-18 – things to notice

- The Fourth Sunday of Easter is usually referred to as Good Shepherd Sunday because the Gospel for all 3 cycles is always a reflection on Jesus as the Good Shepherd.
- Begins with Jesus' declaration about himself as the Good Shepherd – a familiar technique of John – who lays down his life for his sheep. Note: Jesus' life is not taken away by the wolves, he freely lays it down.
- Contrast with the hired man who does not have a relationship/bond with the sheep, so he runs away when the wolves come.
- Second instance of Jesus of Good shepherd, who does have a bond with the sheep – I know mine and mine know me. Note the implied intimacy here.
- This bond between Jesus and the sheep is the same as the bond between Jesus and the Father!
- Second instance of 'lay down my life for my sheep'.
- Reference to 'other sheep, not of this fold' breaks the reflection on the bond between Jesus, Father and sheep. Commonly understood as a reference to other believing communities and possibly gentile converts. It is an attempt to free Jesus' words from being only applied to the group of people who believed in him when he spoke them.
- Notice that these sheep also listen to his voice and that Jesus leads them as well.
- Third instance of 'lay down my life', this time as a fulfilment of the Father's love. these sentences stress Jesus' willing obedience to God in this sense:

"Jesus is the utterly reliable leader and guide who, like the Father, makes the sheep the centre of his life. He knows them all intimately and gives his all for his sheep, even to laying down his life for them...One might think that this signals victory for the wolves and the failure of the shepherd. But, in a superb use of paradox, the passage claims that the death of Jesus brings about the reverse: it is his non-violent victory over the wolves that seek to destroy the sheep. This is 'revealed' in the way he lays down his life (he is

not the wolves' prey) and takes it up again in the resurrection (the sign of victory over the forces that promote death)." Mark O'Brien, The ABC of Sunday Matters.

The Easter Context – why does the church choose this passage to reflect on for the Third Sunday of Easter?

In a sense, the Easter Gospels are a meditation about Jesus – who he is, what he is about, so that the disciples (the church) may learn how to continue his mission & ministry. The Spirit of Jesus is still incarnated in a physical body (ours) and communicated through the physical.

- Sunday 2: Jesus visits the disciples in the room & gives them the Holy Spirit (the power to proclaim forgiveness of God) Jesus appears again to the disciples & to Thomas.
- Sunday 3: Jesus visits the disciples – Luke 24:35-48 (preaching repentance for forgiveness of sins)
- Sunday 4: Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the true shepherd – John 10:11-18
- Sunday 5: Jesus, the true vine – the vine & branches – Jesus, source of life – John 15:1-8
- Sunday 6: Jesus the true friend - No greater love / you are my friends / Jesus commissions disciples to bear fruit / Jesus' commandment to love – John 15:9-17

Reflection

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is often called "Good Shepherd Sunday" because no matter what reading cycle we are in, the Gospel always focusses on the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

This year, the Gospel reading talks about Jesus as a true shepherd prepared to lay down his life for his sheep. He is not like the hired man who runs away when danger appears. He knows his sheep and one day will gather them all into one flock.

Jesus acts towards us like a good shepherd: feeding, nurturing, defending and even laying down his life for us. Our Good Shepherd is deeply concerned about us, the flock and there is a deep sense of warmth and intimacy in the realisation that Jesus knows each one of us. Like a good shepherd Jesus is the source of life, nourishment, and safety for the sheep.

Notice that the sheep are the centre of both the Father and Jesus' lives! Jesus gives his all for them. He lays down his life in the face of the evil confronting the sheep and takes it up again in the resurrection.

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 we also need to think about being/becoming good shepherds to each other – to take up the risen life of Jesus and be a source of life for others.

One of the very encouraging things about the difficult days of the pandemic was the number of people who became good shepherds to others, providing safety and security to vulnerable people, supporting health workers, providing meals and companionship.

That is what it means to lay down our lives for each other.