

Each year, on the fourth Sunday of the season of Easter, the Revised Common Lectionary which we follow provides a section of John 10 as the Gospel reading. Chapter 10 is where Jesus teaches about his role as “the good shepherd” who lays down his life for the sheep. The chapter is divided over the three years: 10:1–10 in Year A, then 10:11–18 in Year B, and 10:22–30 in the current year, Year C.

The section offered in Year A concludes with Jesus saying, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (10:10). The passage set for Year B begins with the famous affirmation, “I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (10:14-15). Both passages develop the image of Jesus as the shepherd of the sheep; a shepherd who: knows his own (10:15), calls them by name (10:3), shows them the way of salvation (10:9), and lays down his life for the sheep (10:11, 15, 17–18).

After the service, I encourage you all to take the time to read Chapter 10 of John’s Gospel in full and see how this good shepherd narrative unfolds.

Now throughout John’s Gospel, responses to Jesus vary widely. There is much discussion concerning Jesus’ identity and authority, which divides people. Some believe that Jesus is the Messiah, and others believe that he is demon-possessed.

In today’s reading, Jesus is in the temple complex. Some people gather around Jesus and ask Jesus to put an end to the debate concerning his identity once and for all: “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly”, they say (10:24).

The problem, of course, is that regardless of what Jesus says or does, the debate will not end. Jesus responds that he has already told them, and that the works Jesus has done in his Father’s name

testify to God. But they do not believe, because they are not Jesus' sheep (10:25-26).

Throughout history different people have taken different views about who Jesus is and, fundamentally, about Jesus' divinity.

The incident of the preceding chapter (Chapter 9) makes that abundantly clear. (In fact, as well as reading Chapter 10 after the service, I encourage you to commence reading at Chapter 9). After Jesus heals a man born blind, the Pharisees see only that Jesus has healed on a Sabbath, and that therefore Jesus must be a sinner. Others question how a sinner can perform such signs (John 9:16). By contrast, the blind man gradually comes to realize who Jesus is and, in the end, worships Jesus as Lord (9:38).

Have you ever experienced the moment when you have tried to convince a friend or work colleague about something, but they just won't agree, no matter how logical the point or the decision is to you. They somehow just see the facts differently, and there is no meeting of minds.

Believing in Jesus Christ can be similar. Some people will read the gospels and talk to others about Jesus – but still just will not accept the divinity of Jesus, or his to be the Good Shepherd. For it is only with the eyes of faith that we can see the truth concerning Jesus.

Today's reading tells us that those who belong to Jesus, who hear and recognize his voice and follow him, have been given to Jesus by the Father (10:29).

In our spiritual life, there can be many voices calling for our attention. There can be voices telling us how to grow closer to God, for example by having a particular religious experience; by believing

a correct doctrine; by reaching a higher level of knowledge or a so called higher level of morality.

By contrast, the Good Shepherd tells us that everything depends on belonging to him. And our status before God does not depend on how we feel, on having the right experience, on being free of doubt, or on what we accomplish. It depends on one thing only: that we are known by the Good Shepherd.

The voice of the Good Shepherd is a voice that liberates rather than oppresses. It does not say, “Do this, and then maybe you will be good enough to be one of my sheep.” It says, “You belong to me already. No one can snatch you out of my hand.”

By the same token, it may be that you, or those you love, are experiencing difficult times: illness; the loss of loved ones; addiction; abuse from those in a place of trust. To you, the Gospel says: “You belong to me already. No one can snatch you out of my hand.”

Secure in this belonging, we are free to live the abundant life of which Jesus spoke earlier in the chapter (John 10:10): “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

The abundant life of which Jesus speaks is not necessarily about abundance in years, or in wealth, or status, or accomplishments. It is life that is abundant in the love of God made known in Jesus Christ, a love which overflows to others (John 13:34-35).

Psalm 23 also makes this promise of abundance. Psalm 23 is commonly read and used in in the context of death and funeral services.

But the language and imagery of Psalm 23 make it fitting for this season of Easter, where the Church considers how to live in light of Christ's death and resurrection. Psalm 23 is more about how a person lives in relationship to God, than about facing death or finding security beyond the grave.

Verse 1a declares, "The Lord is my shepherd", acknowledging God as the one who protects and guides. It acknowledges God as the one to whom we surrender to rule over our life

After this statement, "The Lord is my shepherd," verse 1b adds the unqualified phrase "I shall not want", which can also be translated as "I have no lack", or even "I don't need a thing". The absolute certainty of this second phrase is striking. It suggests the Lord God is all one really needs, that God's shepherding care provides all that is essential to life.

The rest of the psalm illustrates how and why this is true. The list of provision in verses 2-5 (water, food, safety, protection from enemies) canvases the fundamentals of what we need to live.

Verse five then highlights God's extravagant care of the psalmist, and of us. This verse shifts the imagery, from Good Shepherd to good host. As a host who gives refuge to those beset by enemies, God offers abundant food and drink, oil for grooming, as well as the assurance of safety. The psalmist does not just have basic provisions, but enjoys an abundance.

Amidst all the other voices that evoke fear, make demands, or give advice, the voice of the Good Shepherd is a voice of promise. It is a voice that calls us by name and claims us as God's own. It is a promise to keep us safe, amid the uncertainty or chaos of the world. Not so that we retreat from the world, but so that we can go

confidently into the world knowing we are safe in the hand of Christ
Jesus.

Amen