

**ECHOING GOD'S WORD**  
**in**  
**THE CATHOLIC FAITH COMMUNITY**  
**FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**  
**April 30, 2023**

**Lectionary Readings:**

<b>Acts 2:14, 36-41</b>	<b>In order to receive the Spirit, reform and be baptized!</b>
<b>1 Peter 2:20-25</b>	<b>Christ gathered our sins and brought them to the cross.</b>
<b>John 10:1-10</b>	<b>Christ is the Divine Shepherd of Israel.</b>

**John:**

The Church today has a lot of characteristics similar to the Church of John's Gospel. We are now somewhat removed from the initial experience of Christ's life and presence to the disciples. Time has passed. Other voices begin to interpret what has happened. There are competing messages being heard. Some say that the Christian Gospel means one thing; others say it means something else. There are different ways being suggested. The Church has grown and has had a variety of experiences. A good deal of pain has been endured. That has brought its own kind of perspective. Various philosophies and human ways of looking at life have become absorbed into the reflections that people bring to the Christian message. What is the truth now? Where should we look for the authentic voice that leads to salvation?

John summons the Church back to its roots in the Hebrew experience of God. Was not God himself the Shepherd of Israel? And is Jesus Christ not that new Shepherd since he is the complete embodiment of God in the new dispensation?

Shepherds had been a distinguished group of people at one time. They represented the divine image. The shepherd king, David, that gentle boy who had led the people to glory and prestige, had been identified as the representative of God on earth. Shepherds were unselfish servants of the flock. They provided everything for their sheep: food, drink, shelter, defense against enemies. Shepherds gave their sheep an identity, a safety, an opportunity to grow and to be useful. Had not the prophets referred to God as the Shepherd of the Flock which was Israel? The king was only a pale image of the God who cared for his people.

Now, in Christian times, this language and the reality behind it is reclaimed: Christ has laid down his life for the sheep. Who else has a right to claim the flock? Jesus calls himself the *door* or *gate* by which the sheep enter. Doors are either open or closed. They close to protect, and they open to allow passage in and out.

We take doors for granted. Gates are just there but how essential they are to the well-being and the safety of domesticated animals and of people.

Is Jesus Christ just there, taken for granted, expected to be there because he has always been there? Jesus Christ is our true access to the kingdom of God. He guards us against every foe. He protects us from the threat of evil. Who else can we trust so completely? I was in Ireland a few years back with a young priest of our diocese. He brought me to an ancient church off a remote country lane. The area was quite overgrown with brambles and bushes. The church building itself was really quite small and weather beaten. But the *door* was enormous, quite out of proportion to the rest of the edifice. It was set in a gigantic, multi-layered series of carved stone arches, leading to the door itself.

There was no question but that this door represented Christ! For the first time, I understood some of what Jesus meant when he said he was the *gate* and the *door* of salvation!

Would we want to follow a voice that is not truly that of the Good Shepherd? Should we not value the sturdy *door* that is Christ the Lord? Can we afford to take chances with doors and gates that are not the real thing?

The world in which we live is as dangerous as the one in which the community of John lived. There is one Shepherd who is sure; He is the door and the gate of salvation.

### **Acts:**

The name by which one is to be saved is now *Jesus Christ*, since this one has been elevated by the Father to the stature of "*Lord and Messiah*." How can one be saved? Just *repent* and *be baptized*. Then, accept the empowerment of the *Holy Spirit* so that you have the life of God in you. What a summary of the dynamics of salvation! *Repentance*, of course, has to do with a complete "about-face," a complete change from what we were to what God wants us to be, at the depth of the self and in our moral behavior. Just try to do that without the empowerment of the Holy Spirit!

### **Peter:**

The Shepherd was God himself in the Jewish Scriptures. In the Christian Scriptures, Jesus Christ is the Shepherd for God. Then, ministry in the Church is described in terms of shepherding the flock. Israel did not feel put down by the reference as flock of God. It was an honor accorded to no other nation! We should be happy that Christ has chosen us among all the creatures of the world to be "his sheep." If we exercise shepherding in the Church, it is only in terms of Christ, the Good Shepherd, acting through the ministry of the Church. Why should we have to apologize for that?

## **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Do you know anything about shepherds and their flocks? Do you have a sense of security when you look to Jesus as your guide, your teacher, and your model? Do you trust that Jesus Christ will protect you from the ravenous wolves that seek to destroy your soul? Or, has all this stuff just become some old, out-of-date imagery for you?
2. Do you trust the Church and its leaders as authentic representatives of Jesus the Good Shepherd and the Gate of Heaven? What meaning and value are you able to give to the Church as the guide of your salvation? Can the pope be trusted in this day and age so complicated by competing values and divergent points of view? What about the American bishops? Do you trust them? What about the priests and lay leaders of your parish community?
3. Do you suppose John was aware of some of the same issues we face today when he wrote this Gospel for his community? Uncertainties abounded there too! He had to provide a sure guide. How does this message reassure you today? Can you begin to see that Jesus is still present and active through the ministry of human shepherds to this very day? How can you communicate some of this assurance to others?
4. How can you trust the preaching of priests who teach from the pulpit when you know that a few priests have been unfaithful to their vows?

## PRAYER

**Be not afraid. I go before you always.  
Come follow me and I will give you rest.**

**You shall cross the barren desert, but you shall not die of thirst.  
You shall wander far in safety though you do not know the way.  
You shall speak your words in foreign lands and all will understand.  
You shall see the face of God and live.**

(From a Hymn by Robert J. Dufford)

## CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

When the Church community was in the midst of one of its very earliest controversies, over the issue of how Gentiles could be admitted to the Christian faith, the community charted new waters: they took the question to the apostles; these prayed over it, and they decided. It was that simple! Moreover, they said, “We and the Holy Spirit have decided.” That's how confident they were that the Spirit of Jesus was in them, working through them, making decisions on questions where Jesus had left no concrete instructions.

The Church is convinced that the same Holy Spirit still abides in it and works through it. Jesus Christ is as present today as he was that day in Jerusalem when the Church prayed and decided. The youth in our parishes know that. They come together to “discern.” They talk; they pray; then they decide. By the look on their faces, you can tell that they are dead serious about their confidence that they are doing the work of Jesus Christ. If only parish councils were as efficient!

The Church has always acted on the conviction that Christ continues to be present in its midst and that Christ exercises his ministry today through the ministry of the Church. In matters of faith and morals that are meant to be binding on the whole Church, then, of course, the highest authority of the Church is the only competent authority through which Christ can be presumed to be acting. Ecumenical councils in union with the pope, or the pope acting in moral unanimity with the bishops of the whole world, make those kinds of decisions. And I give the same kind of trust to those pronouncements as I do to the words of Christ himself as recorded in the Scriptures.

While not having the same level of authority, lower Church bodies do the very same when they decide issues proper to themselves. They pray and then they decide. And the same Holy Spirit who guides the Holy Father and the bishops in council also guides those other groups of the faithful. I recognize that their decisions are from Christ also, inasmuch as they invoke the same Holy Spirit and in that they desire to be in harmony with the faith and traditions of the whole Church.

In my parish community, I see the Lord Jesus still at work in the business of the kingdom of God. It is not just at the higher levels that Christ does his ministry through people. It is in the family, in the parish, in the schools, in all the Christian groups that are open to the works of the Spirit.

(See **The Catechism: # 738, 424, 949, 737, 778**)  
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