

## HOMILY — SUNDAY EASTER IV A

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*Acts 2:14a, 36b-41*

*Ps 23 R. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

*1 Pt 2:20b-25*

*Jn 10:1-10*

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The fourth Sunday of Easter is commonly called ‘Good Shepherd Sunday’ because the Gospel for today speaks to us of Christ as our Shepherd.

The metaphor of the shepherd was something well understood in the days of Jesus, because, in the regions of Israel and the Middle East, the shepherd was (and still is) a very common and important job. So, when Jesus spoke of the shepherd, everyone had a pretty good sense of what He was talking about. It would’ve been the equivalent of a sport or business metaphor for us today.

Now, most of us today know very little about shepherding, though we might have some idea, especially if we have some knowledge of farming. But that’s only the literal/practical understanding of shepherding. But since Jesus is using the shepherd as a metaphor, it means there’s also a symbolic meaning attached to it.

The image of the shepherd in relation to religious leaders and to God was quite an ancient one for the Jewish people: Abraham, Jacob, Moses and David were all shepherds... So for us to understand more fully what Jesus is saying to us in today’s Gospel, we need to look to the Old Testament for answers, and perhaps the best place to do that is in Ezekiel 34, where Ezekiel prophesies that, since the religious leaders weren’t being faithful, God Himself would become the shepherd of Israel.

Ezekiel prophesied, *I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and strong I will watch over. I will feed them with justice* (Ez 34:15-16).

According to Scripture, the good shepherd seeks, brings back, binds up, strengthens, watches over and feeds. This is his mission; he is the guide and protector, the saviour of the sheep. The Gospels show us that Jesus perfectly corresponds to this image; He fulfils this prophecy. In Jesus, God has come down to us to be our Good Shepherd, to seek us, to bring us back, to bind our wounds, to feed and strengthen us.

Now Jesus does this precisely by becoming man and being with us. Pope Francis is fond of saying that the shepherd needs to smell like his sheep. In other words, he needs to be with them, in their midst, not removed from them or lording his authority over them. This is precisely what Jesus did... and continues to do! Jesus hasn’t abandoned us; He isn’t watching over us from heaven, disconnected from the realities of our life. He’s still here with us, walking with us, healing us, guiding us, feeding us! But are we close to Him?

This time of pandemic certainly can feel like a time of abandonment, but I assure you that Jesus is here with us, that He weeps with us for lack of the Eucharist, that He suffers with us. But that's exactly why this time of pandemic is also a blessing in disguise: it's an opportunity for us to draw near our Good Shepherd, to seek Him out, to listen for His voice.

God has given us in this pandemic a forced slow-down, a time to stop our busyness so that we might spend more time with Him. This is an invitation to steep ourselves in prayer, to spend time with Jesus in silence, opening our hearts to Him, learning once again to recognise His voice amid the noise of this world, to read the Bible and allow Him to speak to us.

And this doesn't need to be complicated. We don't need the TV or the internet to do this, we simply need to take some time — start with 10-20 minutes per day — and sit with Jesus. Take your Bible; make the sign of the Cross; take a moment of silence to compose yourself; ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in this time and to make it fruitful; say an Our Father, and then slowly read a few paragraphs of the Bible. Start with the Acts of the Apostles or with one of Paul's letters. Read slowly and ponder on the what's said, what's happening.

Then ask Jesus what He's trying to say to you with this passage, what He's trying to teach you. It's ok if you feel like you don't get an answer; just sit with it in silence for some time, pondering on what you've read. Remember, conversation isn't just about talking, it's also making space for the other to speak.

After this, thank Jesus for sharing His Word with you and then bring Him your intentions — the people, the situations, the concerns on your heart. Place these before Jesus and invite Him to take care of them. Then ask Mary for her prayers; entrust your needs and your intentions to her, asking her to bring them before Jesus for you. She is the surest way to her Son.

Now the key to making this time of prayer fruitful is to make it intentional and regular. A sporadic prayer life will not grow stronger. As the old saying goes, practice makes perfect. If we want a strong prayer life, we have to do it often. Jesus has given us a gift of time right now: let's make good use of it! In this way, not only will we grow in peace right now in this pandemic, but the habits of this daily life of prayer will continue even afterward, as we learn more perfectly to follow Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

One intention I ask you to bring into your prayer, is for more Priests. Good Shepherd Sunday is also *World Day of Prayer for Vocations*, when the Church reminds us to ask God to send us more shepherds with the heart of His Son, the Good Shepherd. May God open the hearts of the young men He's calling to generously and courageously answer His call.

Lord of the harvest send many good and holy labourers into your vineyard! Grant us shepherds after your own heart. Amen.