

## Fourth Sunday of Easter

### ***First reading:***

*Paul turns to the Gentiles  
(Acts 13.14, 43-52)*

As we watch the Christian message spreading to the ends of the earth, three times Paul is rejected by his own people, the Jews, and forced to turn to the gentiles: once here in Asia Minor, once in Greece and, finally, in Rome. Each time he does so with a biblical gesture, shaking the dust off his feet, shaking out his cloak, finally in Rome quoting the fulfilment of Isaiah.

Was Luke anti-Semitic, then, to paint the picture with such crackling emphasis? Perhaps in God's providence this Jewish rejection was the means by which the gospel reached beyond Judaism. If the Jews had accepted Jesus, would Christianity have remained merely a Jewish sect? In his letters, Paul is bruised to the bone by the failure of his people to accept their promised Messiah, and their failure remains a mystery.

The witness of the Jews as the suffering servant of the Lord continues in another direction, helped no little by Christian anti-Semitism. Paul attests that they will be converted in the end, but how they will finally be grafted into the vine stock he cannot say: 'How deep are the wisdom and knowledge of God' (Romans 11.33).

### ***Question:***

*What can I do to help the Christian mission to all nations?*

### ***Second reading:***

*The Innumerable Gathering of the Redeemed  
(Revelation 7.9, 14-17)*

In his vision, John sees the countless numbers of the redeemed as they will be gathered at the throne of the Lamb. Their palms are the palms of victory and their robes, curiously washed white in blood, are the sign of integrity and innocence.

The Book of Revelation was written at a time, whether of bloody persecution or not, when the temptation was overwhelming to submit to the dominance of Rome. This was not only political but also religious, for the Lord Emperor was worshipped as a god. In every city, there was an altar to Rome and Augustus. The greater the city, the greater the Temple. Worship of the Emperor and Rome set the whole tone for society. To join this worship was the only way to success and prosperity. Yet if Augustus is Lord, Christ cannot be Lord. Christians had to opt out, and many will have paid with their blood. The victory was not by arms but by endurance.

Today also Christians must opt out of many aspects of society -and yet also vigorously opt in, to bring the Christian values as a leavening of society. We cannot stay comfortably huddled round the throne!

### ***Question:***

*Do I give too much ground to the idols and standards of contemporary society?*

**Gospel:**

*The Good Shepherd*

*(John 10.27-30)*

The figure of the Good Shepherd is the nearest approach to a parable in John's gospel. It is so important that the Church puts it before us on the fourth Sunday of Easter in each of the three cycles of readings.

Apart from its obvious sense of Jesus looking after his sheep - and silly, confused sheep at that - this image receives special sense from the figure of the shepherd in the Old Testament. God is the primary shepherd of Israel, who pastures his sheep in pastures green so that they fear no evil (Psalm 23). In Ezekiel 34, God promises to free Israel from the self-centred shepherds who keep the sheep for their own advantage, and to send them a true shepherd after his own heart, a second David, who will tend them as God himself would care for them.

Thus, in putting before us each year in Eastertide, this proclamation that Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the Church is affirming the Risen Christ as the divine Shepherd who tends his flocks. Particularly in these verses, we see the unity of the Risen Christ and the Father in shepherding the sheep, just as in the Book of Revelation we saw the unity of the Lord God and the Lamb, both revered on the one throne.

Question:

*What is involved in imitating Christ as shepherd?*

*Do you ever feel like a sheep in search of a shepherd?*

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