

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER – YEAR B



Today is known as 'Good Shepherd Sunday', because on this Fourth Sunday in all three years of the liturgical cycle, the Gospel is always taken from the tenth chapter of St John's Gospel, where Jesus speaks of himself as the 'Good Shepherd'.

This Sunday is also the World Day of Prayer for Vocations, when we are especially asked to pray that the Church may be provided with the good leaders needed to do its work of spreading the Gospel.

Second Reading 1 John 3: 1–2

The author of this Epistle continues to interpret St John's Gospel to his community. He focuses on the love God has for all. It is as a result of this love that we can be called God's children.

For Christians one of the consequences of being children of God is that we tend to be counter-cultural in our values: *'the world refuses to acknowledge us'*.

There is a tension between the present and the future. We *ARE* God's children, but with great honesty, the author accepts that the future is unclear: *'What we are to be in the future has not yet been revealed'*.

This lack of certainty about the future is also expressed by St Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians: 'Now we are seeing a dim reflection in a mirror; but then we shall be seeing face to face' (1 Corinthians 13: 12).

A main theme of Greek religion of that time was the view that there was a transformative experience for humans when they were in the presence of a divinity: people became what they were looking at. The author of St John's letter uses this argument, which will have been familiar to his audience – i.e. when we see God, we shall be like him.

Gospel John 10: 11–18

Jesus's words highlight the stark difference between good and bad leadership. The familiar imagery is to be understood in the light of the Old Testament idea of God as the shepherd of Israel.

'I am the good shepherd'

In Greek there are two words for 'good'. The first is *agathos*, used in regard to morality. Then there is *kalos*, the word used by John to describe Jesus as the 'good' shepherd. There is a deeper meaning intended here which is sometimes translated as 'lovely' or 'beautiful'.

'I know my own'

A shepherd was totally responsible for the sheep. If anything happened to them, the law required that he should produce evidence that it was not his fault (see Exodus 22: 13, also Amos 3: 12). He would display great courage in protecting his flock (as in 1 Samuel 17: 34–36).

A 'real' shepherd would have been sent out with the flock when very young. The sheep got to know him and he them. In John's Gospel, 'knowing' Jesus means having a personal relationship with him.

The hired man

For the hired man, shepherding was not so much a way of life as a means of making money. In the parable, the 'flock' is the 'Church of Christ', which comes under attack from outside influences. It becomes even more vulnerable if led by 'hirelings' who put their welfare first.

Wolves were a real threat to the flock and Jesus used this fact as a metaphor to warn his disciples of the dangers they faced as he sent them out to do his work. They would be '... as sheep amongst wolves' (Matthew 10: 16).

'I lay down my life for the sheep'

The imagery of good and bad shepherds dates as far back as the prophet Ezekiel (see Ezekiel 34). St John, in quoting Jesus, also differentiates between types of shepherd, but adds a further dimension to his description. It was a new thing in scripture to say that the good shepherd would 'lay down his life' for his sheep.

'I have other sheep that are not of this fold'

God's mercy was not limited to Israel, but was for all people. This will bring about a fulfilment of the prophecies from Isaiah (42: 6 and 49: 6) *'I will make you the light of the nations so that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.'*