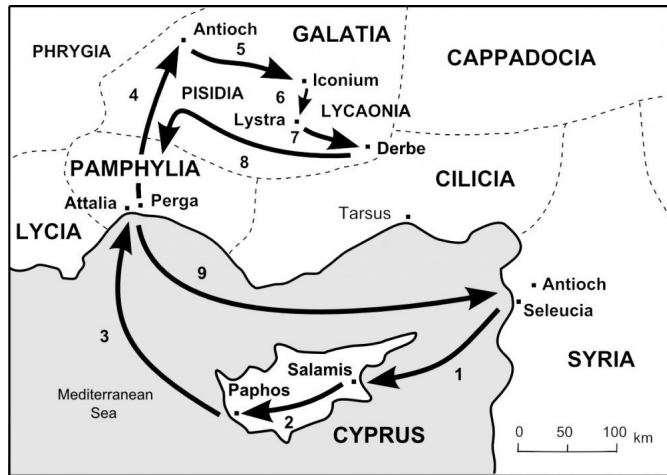


PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER –YEAR C

‘GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY’

First Reading Acts 13: 14, 43–52



Today's extract from the Acts of the Apostles relates an episode from St Paul's first missionary journey (sections 4 and 5 of the map). This region is in Asia Minor, present-day Turkey.

The 100-mile long journey from Perga to Antioch in Pisidia will have been over difficult mountainous countryside. As they arrive at the administrative centre of the Roman province of Galatia, Paul's first port of call is, as always, the synagogue. The town has a considerable Jewish population.

The pattern of events following is typical of the way the disciples are shown to operate in the Book of Acts. They first take the Word of the Lord to the Jews; then follows a rejection from the Jews, which leads them to turn to the Gentiles. It is possible to notice in this a parallel with the sequence of events when Jesus himself preached in Nazareth (Luke 4: 16–30). The disciples were continuing Jesus's ministry.

Clearly the 'whole town' could not fit into the synagogue; the point here is to contrast Gentile enthusiasm with the jealousy of the Jews.

The quotation from Isaiah (49: 6) is part of one of the songs of the Second Servant; Paul is also a servant of the Lord who enlightens the Gentiles.

With a traditional show of annoyance and repudiation (see also Luke 9: 5) they leave for Iconium (modern-day Konya in Turkey), 87 miles from Antioch and capital of the province of Lycaonia.

Today is always referred to as **Good Shepherd Sunday**, since in each year of the liturgical cycle on this Fourth Sunday of Easter, the Gospel is always taken from John 10, where Jesus speaks of himself as the 'good shepherd'. This image of Christ the Shepherd caring for his followers has been used since the earliest years of Christianity. In the biblical way of shepherding, the shepherd leads the flock, calling each sheep by name. The sheep know and trust the voice of their shepherd, following him wherever he leads: a fine model for the love of Jesus for his disciples – and for each of us.

Gospel John 10: 27–30

Today's brief extract is taken from Jesus's final discourse to the people of Jerusalem. It was the feast of Dedication (Hanukkah – see below) and Jesus was walking in Solomon's Portico, a roofed walkway or colonnade, supported by rows of tall, impressive pillars. It was on the east side of the Temple, overlooking the Kidron Valley and a favourite place for prayer and meditation. Rabbis would instruct their students there as they walked along together. Today's text forms Jesus's reply to the Judeans who had gathered round him to ask if he was indeed the Messiah.

'My sheep hear my voice; and I know them and they follow me.'

Jesus replies using the familiar Old Testament idea of the shepherd: a symbol of a good king. Since kings and those in authority often failed in their duty towards the people, John's emphasis here is on the relationship between the shepherd and his sheep. Immediately following the story of the man born blind, some say this chapter may be misplaced, but a further thought is that John records these events in this particular order to highlight the dramatic contrast between the 'blind', bullying authorities, and the protective, loving Jesus – the Good Shepherd.

'I give them eternal life'

Jesus promises his followers a life in which he will always be present to them. Whatever happens, they will be secure in his care; no one can break into their relationship and take them away from him; and even death will not be the end.

'I and the Father are one'

Jesus made these promises to his followers, secure in the knowledge of his unity with God, his Father. He reiterates this in prayer, shortly before his death: 'Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.' (John 17: 11).

The Feast of Hanukkah

This feast celebrated the reconsecration of the Temple by Judas the Maccabean (164 BC) after its desecration three years earlier by Antiochus IV Epiphanes. This annual celebration lasted nine days.

