

Weekly Reading – Monday, April 27, 2009

In view here are the lessons for Sunday May 3, 2009, which is also Easter IV. As is traditional, Easter IV is "Good Shepherd Sunday." The gospel lesson is always some part of John 10 the "I am the Good Shepherd," chapter and the Psalm is always the 23rd. Since "herding cats" seems to be the favored image among pastors these days (and not shepherding sheep) this passage may have lost some of its resonance. Somewhere on the Internet there is a wonderful video of cowboys actually herding cats. Quite funny. Okay, back to the business at hand.

Acts 4: 5 - 12

The Eastertide series from Acts continues, this one following on last week's wherein Peter and John had commanded a lame beggar to rise and walk (and him doing it). Then they spoke to the stunned crowds. Now, Peter and John are on trial before the Council. Makes sense, right? After all, here was a healed man walking around, praising God. That's no good, can't have that! As in last week's speech, Peter and John say the power is not their own, but God's power available to those who call upon the name of Jesus Christ. Then the apostles, just for good measure add, "whom you crucified, but God raised from the dead." To the combined religious and political powers the message is, you do not have the last word, you do not control all the power, you're not in charge here. There is another power on the loose, at work in the world, and the name of that power is Jesus. Moreover, "This Jesus is 'the stone rejected by you, the builders; it has become the corner stone.'" The healing then is not an act of magic, but an assault on the arrogance of worldly powers which have forgotten the source of all power and the final power which rules and overrules all earthly power. This is healing as prophetic ministry. The final verse will arrest many, some seizing on it as the only important point, others struggling with it/ being put off by it. "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." It seems important to keep this in context and not assume that Peter and John are suddenly addressing Islam or Hinduism. Still, there is the assertion of Christ's uniqueness and exclusivity. For some preachers/ churches this is the only thing they have to say and you wish they would spend a bit less time saying "Jesus is the one" and more time and energy following him. For other preachers/ churches there has been a loss of emphasis on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. A recent sermon I heard took an interesting tact. The preacher said that, "Religious exclusivity leads to arrogance and hatred; while gospel exclusivity leads to humility and compassion." Worth pondering (and proclaiming).

I John 3: 16 - 24

I John, in this week's lesson, sounds a good bit like his canonical neighbor, James. "Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." And "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help." Make it real. Still, John keeps the faith message and part of the equation central and in play. He does not simply set aside or dismiss faith in favor of works. God's love, which is greater than our own often divided and sometimes doubting hearts, is for us in Christ. Therefore, we can live and love with boldness and confidence. As one aphorism puts it, "There is more love

in God than there is sin in us." Then in vs. 23 - 24, faith and action are linked. "This is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he commanded us." Some churches seem to have the "believe on the Lord Jesus" part down, but have somehow missed the "love one another." Others have "love one another" as their song, but may somehow miss the faith in Christ part. The trick of course is to hold the two together. The final sentences of my comments on Acts mention a recent sermon in which the preacher kept the two together claiming that trust in Christ as God's unique revelation is made evident in a life of humility, compassion and service. John would have said, "Amen."

John 10: 11 - 18

As noted in the introductory paragraph, Easter IV's gospel text is always some part of John 10 the "Good Shepherd" chapter. And this year's selection, beginning at verse 11, certainly follows well on the previous lesson from I John. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep." He contrasts himself with the "hired hand," who when the wolf comes, takes off. One thing I've noticed about Toronto, where I've been living, is how many owner-run small businesses there are here. It's a different experience to be helped by someone who really knows her/his store and cares about it rather than a bored or clueless clerk who has no investment. Kind of good shepherd/ hired hand thing. Two additional themes emerge in the balance of the verses. One is that Jesus has "other sheep that do not belong to this fold." The gospel writer may have an eye toward other Christian groups besides his own there in the early decades. But it's a helpful, more than that, really important, reminder. There are folks that aren't part of our group, church, denomination or family that Jesus loves and who belong to him. Sort of the like of the famous book of a generation ago, was it by Phillips or Barclay, "Your God is Too Small." The very last verse raises another important theme, which is that Jesus did not have his life taken from him, he gave his life. "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down and power to take it up again." Jesus was not a victim. He claims his power, his life, his choice. Sometimes we slip into the victim mentality that is ubiquitous today. It sometimes seems that if you can show you are some sort of victim then you have attained the moral high ground and nothing more can, or need be, said. Jesus doesn't play that sad game and those who claim to follow him shouldn't play it either. Claim your life and make it an offering.