

11th May: Fourth Sunday of Easter

Acts 2.42-7; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2.19-25; John 10.1-10

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People sometimes believe that church should occupy their entire lives. Those who think this way often have a view of the Church that is idealized, as a near-perfect community but one step away from becoming the Church in heaven. Where else, after all, could you drink such good coffee or listen to such good sermons?

We hear something like this today about the Church in Jerusalem. In his second chapter, the writer of Acts presents a community whose members apparently handed over all their goods to common possession, radically redistributed their wealth to the poor and showed total obedience to their clergy and ministers. Also, their church was growing.

It would be easy to hold up this radical communal living as an unachievable standard for our churches today. Before we do so, though, let's probe a little deeper. We know from the rest of the New Testament that this kind of church organization didn't last long. Perhaps this knowledge should prompt us to ask whether it in fact existed at all. It's easy to hark back to a supposed golden age! Possessions were shared, but this doesn't mean that community members had nothing for their own use. Celebrating the Eucharist in Christians' homes wouldn't have been possible had those homes been sold. We hear later in Acts (4.43-7) that, when the poor needed aid, it was land and second homes that were sold. This selling off of possessions seems to have been a practical response to acute poverty by those lucky enough to own surplus property. In Jerusalem, as today, poverty was often the result of famine. On at least one occasion, the Christians there were supported by a collection sent from the church in Antioch (11.27-30).

Our other readings all involve sheep and shepherds, and show more of what Christian ownership might look like. Sheep, being farmed by humans, wouldn't survive long without protective, caring ownership. It's fortunate for them that that, in John's allegory, they are so well provided for. Watched over by a shepherd as well as a gatekeeper, they probably spend the night in a yard next to a substantial farmhouse. This yard might have a high wall with thorny plants climbing up it, being necessarily difficult to get into. These sheep have the resources and defences they need. But they don't remain in the sheepfold. The shepherd addresses them by name from outside, calling them out from their safe and familiar enclosure to encounter him and be led by him to feed on rich and lush pasture. Indeed, by being the gate, the shepherd makes possible a free coming and going between sheepfold and pasture. The thief seizes resources and destroys life, but the shepherd offers freedom and bestows life. His sheep recognize him and have confidence in him, following without goading or other coercion. There might be a helper at the back, but their role is strictly secondary.

It's again too easy though to get sucked into comforting ideals. The Psalmist knows that the shepherd provides what his sheep needs: lush pasture, water and restoring power. The shepherd leads the sheep down tracks that they will naturally follow, which have no doubt been established by previous generations of sheep and shepherds. But the sheep also wander into dark valleys. It's amid this cold, precipitous terrain that what the shepherd provides is most greatly needed and most joyfully received.

In comforting his sheep, the good shepherd exposes himself to great peril. His bond with his sheep means he'll never desert them. He's different from other shepherds. Indeed, to speak of a "good" shepherd suggests there were a lot more bad shepherds, perhaps little better than the thieves and bandits from whom the sheep had to be guarded. The shepherd had to find and bring home the sheep that had been lost, crippled or killed by predators to prove he hadn't killed it himself for personal gain. So the good shepherd isn't really what society expected. A good shepherd

was a bit like a selfless tax collector or a flexible Pharisee: someone whom people simply didn't expect to meet.

Because the shepherd would be held to account for his flock's life and welfare, when wild animals came prowling he might wield his staff to protect them. But he wouldn't be expected to put his life on the line. With the good shepherd it's different. In Peter's first letter the shepherd is nothing less than the guardian of souls, who preserves those souls and carries them intact even through death. The good shepherd becomes the lamb for sacrifice, exposing himself to abuse, suffering and even death, in order to lead those souls safely through the dark valley.

In his Gospel, John shows us with real clarity how Christ, because he does these things, becomes the sacrificial lamb. Christ's crucifixion fulfils the requirements of the Jewish Passover sacrifice of a lamb. On the cross, no bone of Christ's body is broken and his blood is shed and scattered. Christ's body is removed from the cross before morning (Jn 19.31-34; see Ex. 12.7,10,46). The sponge soaked in wine vinegar, which Christ is offered to drink, is raised on a stem of hyssop, which was the plant used to spread the blood of the Passover lamb (Ex. 12.22). The paschal lamb was, like Christ, also pierced—with a shaft of pomegranate wood, which became a spit for roasting. In John's account, the crucifixion seems to have happened at the time of the lamb sacrifice in the Temple. These elements give a painfully concrete reality to John's description of Christ as the lamb of God. They've been developed in some early Latin hymns for Easter, in which Christ is the 'innocent lamb killed and roasted on the altar of the cross', and 'hung on the spit of the cross and roasted by the fire of love and sorrow'.

What we hear today are stories of shared living that are richer and more relevant than any surrender of personal identity to the group. In most countries, communism has thankfully collapsed and we shouldn't try to bring it back. What we as Christians are called to is lives responsive to the needs of others near and far. We need safe homes, but should also hear Christ's call to leave them to work in the world, where he also provides for us. And Christ walks before us, leading us because we have a natural bond with him. We are his property, bought back by him from death and sin into new life. This is the true, radical image of ownership held up for us today: one that takes seriously the bonds, responsibilities and dependencies that ownership brings. We aren't just nameless units in a larger mass, but live in networks of relationships and obligations in which we both give and receive. We have special others, caring for them and holding possessions in trust for their welfare and also our own. Ultimately, we're called to model our ownership of things in the world on Christ's ownership of us, which is committed, caring and generous.