

EASTER 4, A – May 3, 2020  
SCRIPTURES – Psalm 23; Acts 2:42-47; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers... And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. Acts 2*

You know, Jesus has, in a sense, been social distancing Himself from His followers ever since He ascended into heaven. He is with us, of course, for He promised us this; and Jesus doesn't say things that are not true just to make us feel better. He is with us... just not visibly; and that is hard. For 2,000 years we have had to live at a "social distance": without being able to see Him, touch Him, or hear His own voice. We've had to be content with representatives: shepherds (pastors) who speak His words to us and give us His hidden presence and life in His Sacraments.

It is this understanding that lies behind today's readings. Acts 2 tells us of the days right after Jesus' ascension. The people ***"devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship."*** As those closest to Jesus, they followed them as His representatives. And in the Gospel reading from John 10 Jesus speaks of those who were acting as shepherds of God's sheep. Those who led the sheep through Him, the door, and into the sheepfold were good and were to be followed. But, those who did not... ***"Flee from them,"*** Jesus says. ***"They are thieves and robbers!"*** This is so important to keep in mind. Today, with internet meetings and studies... live-streamed and recorded Services... online blogs... and much, much more, there are 1,000's upon 1,000's of shepherds calling out!

Who should you listen to, and who should you avoid? This might not seem an appropriate question. Faith in God, after all, is a personal thing, a matter of your own heart. And, since Jesus is hidden and unseen, can we really say who is and who isn't qualified to be a shepherd for Him? That is being judgmental... and are we not to be accepting and tolerant? No, we are to listen to Jesus and do as He says! And He warns us to take note of and avoid false shepherds, for they are thieves and robbers.

So: who – which shepherds – should you listen to, and which should you avoid? Our ancestors in the faith have helped us here. ***"I believe in one holy Christian and apostolic Church,"*** we confess in the Nicene Creed, the summary of the true faith which they handed down to us. The true churches and true shepherds of Jesus are apostolic: proclaimers and followers of the teachings and practices of Jesus' apostles. For, His apostles were His chosen representatives. He promised them that He would send upon them the Holy Spirit to bring to their minds all that He had said and done (John 14:26); and He did so on the day of Pentecost. They then taught about Jesus and, finally, wrote down for us their teachings and practices in the 27 books of the New Testament. Written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, their words are true and trustworthy. Those who believe this, and so proclaim their words and follow their practices, are true shepherds. Those who deny and reject this are thieves and wolves.

Now: how should the Scriptures – how should Christ, who is the door of the sheep, the heart and content of the Scriptures – be preached, and taught, and followed?

Peter speaks of Jesus as an example to be followed. He says in his first letter: **“Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps... He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.”** How do you follow His example? What is the righteousness that you are to live, the sin which you are to avoid? Well, when, for instance, you are mistreated, remember that Jesus, **“when he was reviled, did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.”** And so, do not to respond harshly and give back what you got. Do not bear anger in your heart and desire revenge. Such things are sins against Jesus; a denial of His suffering! Instead, love as Jesus loved – everyone, even those who sin against you. Respond sacrificially to wrongs done to you. Forgive them and deal gently with the person, even though it costs you. This is what Jesus did; and He is the true Christian, the One who truly obeyed God. You are to be like Him.

But, as you remember this and strive to live as Jesus did, you’re going to realize something else: you are not like Jesus. Anger and feelings of unfairness and injustice quickly rise up in our hearts and minds when we are treated unfairly. It’s hard to entrust yourself to the justice of God, even though He judges justly, because He – and His justice – is hidden! It is so often not evident in our world, in which people follow their own desires and the strong prosper more than the weak. This is a sinful world! And you and I are not only a part of it; we are like it. To be like Jesus... to be accepting and forgiving... it doesn’t seem right! And so, we fail in this. We are sinners!

And Jesus is, above all, the door. He is the way to safety and protection, the entrance to God and heaven. Those who focus primarily upon Him as an example, and/or upon God as a lawgiver, are false shepherds, like those Jesus spoke of in John 10. Those shepherds – the Pharisees and teachers of the Law in Jesus’ day – emphasized obeying God, and proclaimed that His blessing would come only when you did so. Many shepherds today do the same. So many do not focus upon His cross and His sacrifice for us, but upon how obedience to Him will bring you your best life now.

Obedience is not the way to God’s blessing; it is the response to it. **“I am the door of the sheep,”** Jesus says. He – and not your obedience, your Christ-like life – is the entrance to the safety and peacefulness of God’s presence. And, lest anyone think that He is the door by His obedience, He goes on to say, **“I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”** (John 10:11) By His sacrifice He is the door, the way to God and His blessing. Peter emphasizes this, also. **“[Jesus] Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree... By His wounds you have been healed.”** His wounds – His sacrificial, bloody death upon the cross as the payment for our sins – is our healing. Healing: this is the blessing that the sick receive, and not the healthy. Jesus came for the sick; for sinners. He gave Himself into the sickness and death of our sins on the cross. His wounds, His death for you, are your healing.

This is Christ's preaching. It is the preaching and focus of His apostles, His chosen representatives. True shepherds and true churches focus above all upon Christ's wounds and direct you there for your healing. They focus upon this in their preaching. They distribute His healing to you often in the Sacrament of His true body and true blood. **"By His wounds you have been healed,"** Peter says, and apostolic preaching says. It is done. By Jesus death you are healed... completely. You are healthy! You are whole. You are in God's good pasture and safe in His sheepfold!

And now, you can live a healthy life... listening to your Good Shepherd, following and obeying His voice here and now in the confidence that He will guide you and bless you, and others through you, in every event of your life. Even when you **"walk through the valley of the shadow of death,"** you need not fear! Jesus, your Good Shepherd, walked through that valley before you. And He continues to send out His shepherds to walk with you. Speaking His apostolic words, representing Him and bringing Him, they bring you the comfort of knowing that He is the door to the resurrection and life eternal with the Father in heaven. At the approach of death, then – as well as in every time of life – you can say with confidence the wonderful words of Ps. 23: **"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord"** – and the social distancing of not seeing Him, or hearing Him or touching Him – will be ended **"forever!"** Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.