

The Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 11

Opening Collect

O God, whose Son Jesus Christ
is the Good Shepherd of your people
leading us to the waters of life
and the table of bounty:
Grant that when we hear his voice
we may know him,
who calls us by name,
and follow where he leads;
who with you and Holy Spirit, lives and reigns,
one God, now and for ever.

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is always "Good Shepherd Sunday"

Acts 9:36-43: Peter, visiting Christians in Lydda (near today's Tel Aviv), was met by messengers from Joppa. Tabitha (both "Tabitha" and "Dorcas" mean "gazelle") had died. Perhaps Tabitha was well known for her good works, for Peter immediately went to her death bed. We get a glimpse of the mourning rituals of the time in that all the "widows" stood around Tabitha's body "weeping" (probably wailing inconsolably). Peter put them outside the room and, after praying, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, commanded Tabitha to rise, which the scripture says she did! Peter showed Tabitha to the "saints" (an early use of that title) and widows. A subtle line is then heard, that Peter stayed "with Simon, a tanner." This is significant because tanners (working with animal hides) were always considered "unclean." Peter was showing a disregard for such beliefs.

There was at Joppa a certain disciple named Tabitha, which by interpretation is called Dorcas: this woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did. And it came to pass in those days, that she was sick, and died: whom when they had washed, they laid her in an upper chamber.

And forasmuch as Lydda was nigh to Joppa, and the disciples had heard that Peter was there, they sent unto him two men, desiring him that he would not delay to come to them.

Then Peter arose and went with them. When he was come, they brought him into the upper chamber: and all the widows stood by him weeping, and shewing the coats and garments which Dorcas made, while she was with them. But Peter put them all forth, and kneeled down, and prayed; and turning him to the

body said, Tabitha, arise. And she opened her eyes: and when she saw Peter, she sat up.

And he gave her his hand, and lifted her up, and when he had called the saints and widows, presented her alive.

And it was known throughout all Joppa; and many believed in the Lord. And it came to pass, that he tarried many days in Joppa with one Simon a tanner.

Revelation 7:9, 14b-17: John the Divine was given a vision of what will occur at the end of the current age. Chapter 7 contains two visions that affirm that God's people will be saved from the devastation of the end times. We hear of the multitude holding "palm branches" – a sign of victory and thanksgiving (such as on Palm Sunday and Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem). The multitude, we are told, are those who remained faithful through the "great ordeal" (persecutions). They have received the gift of Christ's death, and to show this, having washed their robes in Christ's blood, making them "white" (symbolized by the white alb, still worn today). The reading concludes with a reference to ceaseless worship of the Lamb, who is their shepherd, protecting them under the authority of God.

This I, John, beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands;

And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them.

They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat.

For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.

John 10:22-30: Jesus' claim to oneness with God had aroused some suspicion and concern within the religious establishment. Others thought he was demented to make such a claim but cannot explain away his healing miracles. So, they decided

to go ask him directly. Jesus, who was never willing to answer these people straight out, told them to look at his “works” and decide for themselves. He called those who believe him his “sheep” and implied an intimate relationship. Echoing the Revelation to John the Divine, Jesus said that his sheep will not be annihilated at the end times, and that no one will be able to snatch them (hey, that’s us!) out of his hands.

It was at Jerusalem the feast of the dedication, and it was winter.

And Jesus walked in the temple in Solomon’s porch.

Then came the Jews round about him, and said unto him, How long dost thou make us to doubt? If thou be the Christ, tell us plainly.

Jesus answered them, I told you, and ye believed not: the works that I do in my Father’s name, they bear witness of me.

But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you.

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me:

And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.

My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand.

I and my Father are one.

As comforting as the image of Jesus the Good Shepherd is, it also brings a rather discomfoting thought. We’re sheep. It’s one thing to sing, “I am Jesus’ little lamb.” Lambs are cute. But sheep are anything but cute. They’re stubborn, prone to wander, dependent, high maintenance, and ornery. “All we like sheep have gone astray.” Not a pretty picture, is it?

Sheep need to be led and guided, or they will perish. We need to be guarded against the wolves, warded off of the polluted puddles and the poisoned weeds. We are utterly dependent upon our Good Shepherd for every good and perfect gift of forgiveness, life, and salvation, and without Him we perish.

The church is a flock of blood-bought sheep who hear the voice of their Lamb and Shepherd calling to them from out of their Baptism. “Follow me.” And they follow Him. They hear His Word. He gives them eternal life, and they will never perish. Death cannot harm them. The devil is no threat to them. They go through the dark valley of this world hearing the voice of Jesus calling them. He’s gone ahead of them through death and the grave. He’s risen from the dead, and now like a shepherd calling his sheep to follow him through the valley, He leads them from death to life.

That's what it means to follow Jesus: to walk through the darkness, despair, and danger of this present age fearing no evil knowing that Christ, your Lamb and Shepherd is with you.

John's vision in Revelation is yours too. It's the vision of what is now by faith and not yet in your possession. It's the hope of resurrection and life that awaits you, and it's the joy of eternal life and glory that is already yours in Christ. This is the green pasture to which the Good Shepherd is leading you and has gone ahead of you. This is where "follow me" leads you:

"Therefore they are before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.
They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ, our risen Lord.

Concluding Prayers

We pray for Christian churches throughout the world, that they may experience unity and may follow Christ their Shepherd. We pray especially for our bishops, our clergy, and our Lay Reader, and all the lay leaders of our parish, that, with outstretched hands, we might continue to be a source of healing for each other, and for the world, raising us up, with God's grace, from the sleep of death.

We pray for Charles, our king, and the leaders of this nation and all the nations of the world, that they may be imbued with wisdom, and seek only the welfare of their peoples.

We pray for the homeless, the hungry, and the sick, that they may find comfort in the one who shelters them with holy presence, guides them to springs of living water, and wipes away every tear from their eyes.

We pray for all parents and those who give parental care, that they may follow the example of the Good Shepherd who leads his children to good pasture.

In thanksgiving for Peter and Dorcas, all the saints and martyrs, we continually commend our brothers and sisters into God's safe keeping

Safe in your hand, O God,
is the flock your Son shepherds:
ransomed for eternal life,
never shall they perish.
Count us, we pray
among those who hear his voice,
who know him and follow him.
We ask this through
your risen Son, Jesus the Christ,
who with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
is one God, now and for ever.

For our Parish of All Saints' Sarnia.

O GOD the Holy Ghost, Sanctifier of the faithful: Sanctify this parish by thine abiding presence. Enlighten the minds of thy people more and more with the light of the everlasting Gospel. Bring erring souls to the knowledge of God our Saviour; and those who are walking in the way of life, keep steadfast unto the end. Give patience to the sick and afflicted, and renew them in body and soul. Guard from forgetfulness of thee those who are strong and prosperous. Increase in us thy manifold gifts of grace, and make us all to be fruitful in good works; O blessed Spirit, whom with the Father and the Son together we worship and glorify, one God, world without end. *Amen.*

Lord's Prayer

Our Father,
who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name, t
hy kingdom come,
thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.

May the God of peace,
who raised from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ,
that great shepherd of the sheep,
make you perfect in every good work that you do God's will
and give glory to our risen Lord Christ.
And may the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be amongst you and remain with you, now and for ever.