

Notes for Preachers: Earth Day (Fourth Sunday of Easter)

Readings: Acts 4: 5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3: 16-24; John 10: 11-18.

The earliest known image of Jesus was found in the baptistry of an early third-century house-church in Dura-Europas¹. It is an image of Jesus as a shepherd carrying a sheep across his shoulders, an image that became very common in the early Church. Images of Jesus on the cross did not appear for another three centuries. This may seem surprising to us, until we consider this Sunday's gospel.

According to John, the two most important characteristics of a "good shepherd" (as opposed to a hired one) are (1) the shepherd knows the sheep and is known by them, and (2) the shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (*John 10: 14-15*). This image of Jesus as our shepherd therefore carries much of the meaning we see in a crucifix; yet it conveys a different sense of salvation from the all too common judicial one (that God absolves us of guilt on the strength of Jesus' sacrifice, thus making us eligible for heaven when we die). When we learn to see ourselves not just as beneficiaries of his suffering, but as sheep of his flock, we can see that our salvation is *our relationship with him*. Salvation is following where he leads and doing what he does! As the second reading puts it, "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us — and we ought to lay down our lives for one another."

It is worth noting that this discourse on sheep and shepherds takes place in Jerusalem (*see verse 22*). The only sheep there would have been the ones brought for sacrifice in the Temple, scapegoated for the sins of the people! Unlike those sheep, however, Jesus would not be yet another helpless victim whose life was taken away. "No one takes it from me," he says, "but I lay it down of my own accord...to take it up again" (*verse 18*).

This exposes an even deeper level of the shepherd image, for the shepherd is also "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (*John 1: 29*). He not only shepherds the victims of violence, but suffers the world's abuse and rejection, in order to break the deadly cycle of violence. There is no longer any need for hopelessly resigning ourselves to such violence in the world, for by his death and rising he has opened the way to God's kingdom, on earth as in heaven. What we become by following him is nothing less than instruments of God's work of healing a world addicted to violence. He is our shepherd because he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. As Irenaeus wrote, "He became what we are so that we might become what he is."²

¹<http://www.thebyzantinelegacy.com/dura-church>

²Against Heresies.

What will this look like? Our first reading offers an example. Peter and John have just healed a lame man in the name of Jesus in the Temple precincts. Then, in response to the consternation of the crowd, they have publically explained how and why this has happened: the God of Israel has glorified the Messiah whom this very crowd handed over to be crucified. They asked for the release of a murderer and killed the Author of Life; yet it was through faith in the name of this crucified and glorified Messiah that this lame man was healed.

But then the Temple authorities (the Sadducees in particular) got wind of what Peter and John had been proclaiming — that “in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead” (*Acts 4: 2*), and Peter and John were arrested. So the apostles repeat to the Sanhedrin what they had told the crowd in the Temple. And because the man who was lame was standing right there, the authorities couldn’t pretend that this healing had not happened; all they could do was order the apostles “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus” (*verse 18*).

What should followers of Jesus do when the authorities insist that public order and economic stability requires suppression of the truth?

This Sunday is also Earth Day: a day to confront the truth of global warming and our own share of responsibility for the accelerating destruction of this good earth. We don’t know enough to predict exactly how great the destruction will be, but it is clear that elected authorities have been suppressing the truth about the consequences of business as usual.

What will it mean, then, ‘to lay down our lives for our friends’? Or, as the second reading puts it, “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?” Or as we might put it, “How does God’s love abide in anyone who benefits from a rapacious lifestyle, but sees a brother or sister overwhelmed by disaster, and yet keeps silent?”

— *Canon John Hill*