

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Fourth Sunday in Easter – Year C

RCL Readings – Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

ACNA Readings – Acts 13:14-16, 26-39; Psalm 100; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

Introduction. Easter and Christmas are two principal festivals in the Christian calendar that stretch out into seasons. Those seasons extend the joy and message of the festival. During Easter, the resurrection continues to resonate in our hearts, in our prayers and in our community life. The Fourth Sunday in the Easter season is also called Good Shepherd Sunday and includes the familiar shepherd readings of John 10 and Psalm 23. The metaphor of the Good Shepherd is deeply messianic and even more so in light of the resurrection.

Common Theme. Shepherds and shepherding are the obvious themes in this Sunday's readings. We all need a shepherd. Unfortunately, the experience of flawed human leadership can persuade so many people to think that they don't. The ancient philosopher Plato recorded that the best form of government was based on virtue and justice and headed by someone who was the best at all things. No human has achieved such heights, but the good news is no mere man sits on the throne. The risen Messiah can accomplish all things, as the Good Shepherd. And that is very good news!

Acts 9:36-43. Ancient Joppa is present-day Jaffa, just south of Tel Aviv. The ancient city had fallen to the Jewish Hasmonean dynasty during the second century B.C. and by the first century A.D. had a substantial Jewish population. Joppa is famous for being the port of departure of the prophet Jonah. In this week's reading from Acts, Joppa becomes the site of a resurrection, that of the disciple Tabitha. The literary record reveals that resurrections were extremely rare, and there is no indication that the followers of Jesus believed that dead Christians would always be brought back to life. The account of Tabitha is unique in that this is the only case in the New Testament in which the miracle worker (in this case Peter) was sent for after the person died. In the Gospels, Jesus was sent for while people were sick but still alive. Jesus was summoned to the tomb of Lazarus, not to bring him back from the dead but, to heal him. Why did Tabitha's friends seek Peter from Lydda? Perhaps it is because Luke initially introduces Tabitha as a disciple who was 'always doing good and helping the poor'. Perhaps it is because after the miracle 'many believed in the Lord'. The Aramaic words Peter uses are extremely similar to the Aramaic words Jesus used when resuscitating Jarius' daughter in Luke 8. In Luke's Gospel Jesus says, 'Talitha Cumi' and here Peter says, 'Tabitha Cumi'. Peter has learnt from his Teacher, and through the Holy Spirit, he is putting his faith and knowledge of the resurrection into practice. The resurrection is not an event but a person. Jesus says, 'I am the resurrection and the life!' We should carry the resurrection into all aspects of our life and community.

Psalm 23. Known as the 'shepherd psalm' for obvious reasons, this prayer of David reflects his experience of God in the context of the ancient world in which many cultures thought of god as a divine shepherd. David wrote of God as both a protector and provider who disciplines his beloved flock.

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Without the shepherd, the psalm implies the sheep will face starvation and danger at the hands of predators. One point to note is verse 5, in which God provides a table of food in the company of David's enemies. Hospitality and food were points of honour in the ancient world, as they are in the Middle East to this day. Both Jews and Muslims trace the humble practice of hospitality back to Abraham, who entertained God himself with hospitality and food. Meal occasions are powerful events. It is during meal occasions that people who disagree with each other can sit and eat together, fellowship and discuss and perchance see something in the other person that they had not noticed before. Perhaps they may even rise from the table no longer as enemies but as friends. The Good Shepherd can arrange those events for us where a current enemy can become a future friend.

Revelation 7:9-17. The revelation to John shows that, in the end, the Great Commission to bring the Gospel to the whole earth is successful. John describes that he witnesses an impressive multitude that cannot be numbered, from every tribe and nation, in worship of the Lamb. John notes that they come from different tribes and nations, with different tongues. Interestingly, there will be differences in heaven as there are differences on earth. The resurrection does not make us all become physically the same. Spiritually there is no difference, as Paul writes: there is no male or female, no slave or free. However, physically there are differences even into the world to come. God has made us unique, beautiful and diverse. The multitude are joined by the inhabitants of heaven – the angels, the creatures and the elders – in worship. Who are these elders around the throne? Revelation does not inform us. One of the elders addresses John and describes the scene for him. Jesus, the Lamb of God, is described as a shepherd of the multitude. From this vision, we learn that the Good Shepherd continues his work of guiding, protecting, sustaining and caring for the flock after the resurrection and into the world to come. The Good Shepherd laid down his life for the flock, only to pick it back up again and continue the work of the Shepherd. Jesus never stops being the Good Shepherd. It is comforting to know that Jesus is shepherding us right now here on earth and he will continue to do so in Heaven.

John 10:22-30. Shepherds at the time of Jesus were placed rather low on the social status spectrum. However, the ancient metaphor of the shepherd was thought of quite highly and was a characteristic of leadership. All the patriarchs of the Jewish people were shepherds, from Abraham to David. There is something about shepherding that produces good biblical leaders. In one rabbinic midrash¹, the question is asked, 'When is Moses ready to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt?'. The answer is found in the rabbinic commentary Shemot Rabbah 2 where Moses is shepherding the flocks of his father-in-law Jethro in Midian. One sheep wanders and gets lost and Moses leaves the rest to follow and return the lost sheep. During this event, Moses encounters the burning bush as God has seen the compassion of Moses over the one lost sheep and knows his hero is ready to lead. The scene is actually included in the animated movie the *Prince of Egypt*. Compassion and caring for others, particularly the lost, are

¹ Jewish story told to highlight a biblical truth.

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characteristics of biblical leadership. Good shepherds care for each and every member of the flock and not just the people that think theologically like them or share the same politics. We might sometimes think of sheep as being all the same, but they are not. Jesus knows his sheep, both as a community, the body of the Messiah, and as individuals. This relationship of 'knowing' is reciprocal in that Jesus knows his sheep and his sheep know him. The relationship is maintained not simply by grazing under the watchful eye of the shepherd but by the leading of his voice, his instructions and commandments. Our job is to listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd, both as a community and as individuals. Another aspect of the messianic task is the bringing of the light to the Gentiles so that they too may worship the living God. The Psalms proclaimed that the Gentiles would also one day worship the Lord (Psalm 117). The Prophets declared that in the future the Gentiles would celebrate Sukkot in universal adoration of God (Zech 14) and prophesied that the Sovereign Lord would gather not just the exiles of Israel but others not of Israel (Isa 56:8). The agenda of God is to form the people of God and to live with them. This includes the Gentiles. Jesus declares that this too is part of his mission when he says, 'I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen; I must bring them also'. There will be one flock and one shepherd. Some take this to mean ecclesiastical unity into one Church and resent denominations, However, the messianic point is that Jews and Gentiles will both accept the lordship of God and his Messiah.

ACNA Readings

Acts 13:14-16, 26-39. This account in the Acts of the Apostles records the sermon by Paul in the synagogue of Antioch of Pisidia. Luke presents a small window into early Jewish synagogue practice of the weekly readings from the Hebrew Scriptures. After a reading from the Torah and then the Prophets, an educated person would be invited to comment on what had been read. Note that throughout the book of Acts there are no rabbis in synagogues. At the time of Jesus, rabbis were itinerant preachers and not heads of communities as they are today. We note also that there is a mix of Jews and Gentiles in the synagogue. The non-Jews are called God-fearers and are a part of the Gentile world that is attracted to monotheism. Jewish communities in the diaspora had had some success in bringing monotheism to the pagan world several hundred years prior to Jesus. Gentiles would already be invited to believe in the God of Israel without becoming Jews. Hence we find in the Gospels and Acts that Gentiles are in attendance in synagogues while remaining Gentiles. Paul takes the opportunity to preach the resurrection. In Jewish exegetical tradition when you declare something in a sermon or discussion you bring a verse called a *pasook* as your proof-text to support your statement. Paul references Psalm 16:10 and Isaiah 55:3 to support his claim that the Messiah has indeed risen from the dead according to the Scriptures. This was important in context as the community in Antioch were not witnesses to the resurrection. Paul's preaching and the evidence he brings from the Word of God excites the community, which invites Paul and his companions to return the following Sabbath. The resurrection is hope and light to a dark world. It is attractive and something we should declare boldly and not hide.

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Psalm 100. The title of this psalm declares that it is 'for giving thanks'. It is the only psalm with this title. The psalm is universal in scope in that it invites the whole earth, all the nations of the Gentiles, to worship the Lord. The Lord is the creator of all peoples, not just Israel. Israel has been set apart to be a light to the nations and to bring light to the entire earth. The psalmist invites the nations of the world to not just know that the Lord is God but to enter into His service. We are to serve the Lord, not because He is harsh and cruel and will cast us into Hell if we don't. We are invited to serve God because he is good, he is the Creator, he is the Shepherd, and we are to serve with gladness. At the end of time, after having done our duty, it will be our delight to hear the words of Jesus, 'Well done good and faithful servant'.

About the author. The Rev. Aaron Eime is a deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and a teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master's program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.