

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Year B



FIRST READING Acts 4:8–12

PSALM
Psalm 118:8–9, 21–23, 26,
28–29

SECOND READING 1 John 3:1–2

GOSPEL
John 10:11–18

*Scripture quotations from
New Revised Standard Version Bible:
Catholic Edition, © 1989, 1993.
Used with permission.*

PRAYER

Psalm 118:8–9, 21–23, 26, 28–29

It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to put confidence in mortals.

It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to put confidence in princes.

I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.

The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.

This is the LORD's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.

Blessed is the one
who comes in the name of the LORD.

We bless you
from the house of the LORD.

You are my God,
and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God, I will extol you.

O give thanks to the LORD,
for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

READING THE WORD

First Reading
Acts 4:8–12

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the

people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;

it has become the cornerstone.' There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

Second Reading
1 John 3:1–2

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

Gospel
John 10:11–18

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

HEARING THE WORD

“The Salvific Union”

The fourth Sunday of Easter focuses on the union of the believer with Christ. Such a union unites the believer with God in this world, and eventually leads to eternal life.

The first reading contains the defence speech of Peter delivered before the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was a Jewish governing council concerned with the administrative and religious affairs of Jews living in Jerusalem and Judea. This speech follows the one Peter delivered to the crowd in the Temple after the healing of a lame man. In the aftermath of this healing Peter and John were arrested by the authorities. Their appearance before the Sanhedrin would present an opportunity for the two apostles to bear witness to the Risen Lord before the “rulers of the people and elders”. These Jewish authorities challenged the apostles with the question, “by what power or by what name did you do this?” (Acts 4:7). Today’s reading contains a part of Peter’s response.

Peter speaks guided by the Holy Spirit in fulfilment of the words of Jesus who promised the Spirit’s guidance in precisely such situations (cf. Luke 12:11-12). Skilfully appealing to the act of healing, Peter declares that Jesus who was cru-

cified and raised by God is, in fact, the long-awaited saviour. In Greek, the word for “healing” also means “salvation”. Salvation is nothing else but the ultimate healing of humanity afflicted by sin and death. In his death and resurrection Jesus, in fulfilment of the words of Psalm 118:22, became the cornerstone of the new life, healed and restored. The physical healing of the lame man became the testimony and sign of the final salvation which Jesus offers. This is the message Peter boldly proclaimed before the leaders and before “all Israel”. With this declaration and the one made in Peter’s earlier speech in the Temple, the message that salvation is found “in the name of Jesus” becomes known to all in Jerusalem. The expression “in the name of Jesus” implies that a person enters into an intimate union with Jesus through faith. Such a union leads to eternal salvation.

A passage from the first letter of John reminds the faithful about the great dignity bestowed upon them; because the Father loved them, they have become God’s children, God’s beloved. God’s paternal love for his people was revealed already in the OT in statements such as Hosea 11:1, “when Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son”. But the full depth of this love was revealed when God sent his Son to die for God’s beloved (cf. John 3:16).

While the believers are already God’s children, the full implications of this identity remain hidden from the human eye. For this reason, “the world” – those without faith – do not “know” the believers. The unique Christian way remains obscure and misunderstood to those without faith. However, even the Christians themselves are only partially aware of the implications of being “God’s beloved.” What it truly means will become known only in the final union with God when eternal salvation becomes a reality. The author beautifully describes this future union as “seeing God as God truly is.” This union has its roots in the present world where the believers are joined to God through the Holy Spirit. But the union will become complete only in the future, when the full effects of Jesus’ salvific work will be manifested and experienced.

The theme of union with Jesus dominates the Gospel reading. The evangelist employs the image of the shepherd to describe it. In our passage we find one of the Johannine “I am” statements of Jesus – “I am the good shepherd”. In this Gospel such phrases are used to reveal the most important aspects of Jesus’ mission and identity. Therefore, the figure of the good shepherd is not just a beautiful and inspiring image but a tool to reveal three important insights about Jesus’ mission in the world and his relationship to the believers.

The first characteristic of the good shepherd highlighted in today's passage is his willingness to offer his life so that his followers, his "sheep", may live. Looking to his sacrifice on the cross, Jesus describes himself as fully committed to those under his care. Such depth of commitment distinguishes him from the false shepherds who would run away and abandon their flock at the first sight of danger. As the good shepherd, Jesus is prepared to go to the greatest lengths to ensure that his followers will have enduring life.

The second characteristic revealed by today's passage points to the bond of mutual knowledge between God, Jesus, and the believers. "I know my own [sheep] and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father". This "web" of mutual knowing reflects the bond which Jesus establishes between God and the faithful. The biblical concept of "knowing" does not imply theoretical or abstract knowledge. In the language of the Scripture, "to know" means to share in someone's identity; to know is to be like the one known. John emphasizes that the disciples know God through Jesus. By establishing such communion, Jesus makes the believers sharers in God's own life. This sharing of the divine life makes Jesus the good shepherd indeed.

Finally, Jesus the good shepherd speaks of his resurrection. The resurrection

was the ultimate purpose of his sacrificial death and his mission in the world. In the resurrection Jesus overcomes the power of death ensuring that his followers, his "sheep" will have life in abundance, unending and permanent life in God's presence. This eternal life means nothing other than salvation – the full knowledge of, and union with, God in eternity.

The fourth Sunday of Easter continues to discuss the effects of Jesus' resurrection on the believers, focussed on union with God through Jesus. The liturgy reveals that God's love for humanity underlined his Son's mission to the world. God's intent was to bring the faithful to eternal union with himself so that they can "see God as God truly is". Such a union was established by Jesus who, even though rejected, became "the cornerstone of salvation". As the good shepherd he laid down his life for his followers in order to defeat death. He also established a bond of "mutual knowing" between God and the believers, the bond which makes them God's children already in this world. This knowledge and union with God, initiated in this world, will have its full effects in eternal life. The faithful, aware that God through Jesus drew them into this salvific union, can rightfully utter the prayer of thanksgiving with the words of the psalmist, "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever."

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

Accessing the presidential palace of a sitting president is tough. The red tape and the security checks are enough to scare any ordinary person who desires to meet the president. However, the children of the president have no difficulty meeting their father. Their status as children gives them unrestricted access to the otherwise inaccessible person. In a similar way, in union with Christ, we have become children of the Father and have full access to his kingdom. This salvific union makes the author of the first letter of John exclaim, "see what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are."

The same salvific union is reflected in sacramental language when, during Mass, the priest mixes the wine with water saying, "by the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity."

The union we have with God, in and through the person of Jesus, is akin to what exists between husband and wife in the sacrament of matrimony. In the marriage vows, a partner solemnly declares that in good times and bad, in sickness and health, for better or worse, he/she would be faithful to the other partner. In such union, husband and wife share all that they are and have. In

a similar fashion, the salvific union that binds every Christian with Christ makes it possible for us to access all that is accessible in the heavenly kingdom.

Jesus pledges his commitment to this salvific union when he says: "I know my own and my own know me...I lay down my life for the sheep". Thus, he gives himself completely to us in this unparalleled expression of the love of the Father for us.

There is a proverb, famous in both Nigeria and Ghana, which says, "a child that washes his hands well gets to eat with the elders." Yes, by sharing in the paschal mystery of Christ and through the sacraments of Christian initiation, we have washed our hands and now have access to the "Bread of Heaven" and the "Tree of Life".

The joy of Easter is not fleeting or momentary. It is an experience of an unending and overflowing eternal bliss that transcends space and time. We rejoice on earth. At the same time our hope looks beyond earth towards the resurrection when our earthly lives have run their course. Yes, "what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is." This is the foundation of the hope and confidence we have as Christians. That same confidence enabled Peter to address the "rulers of the people and elders" without any fear.

As in the case of Peter, the season of Easter affords us the opportunity to witness to the power of the resurrection and to let everyone know that the love of God has been made visible in the person of Jesus. This love of God is accessible through faith in Jesus. Indeed, faith in Jesus brings salvation into all spheres of one's life. This is the unique effect of the salvific union we have in Christ.

PROVERB

*"A child
that washes
his hands well
gets to eat
with the elders."*

ACTION

Self-examination:

In what ways does my relationship with Christ manifest itself in the way and manner I live my life? Looking at my life, could my relatives and friends testify that I am Christlike? What would make them say so?

Response to God:

I think of the gift of salvation freely offered to me through

the paschal mystery and I allow my heart to well up with gratitude. I think of the immeasurable love of God towards me and I turn to the heavenly Father with words of praise and thanksgiving.

Response to your World:

The salvific union with Christ is open to all. I will think of a way I can lead a specific person deeper into that union.

In the group we will explore some ways by which we can let family members, friends and neighbours hear the message of salvation anew, and in such ways that would make a difference in their lives.

PRAYER

*Eternal Father,
you have proven
beyond doubt
that your love for us is deep.
You gave
your Son Jesus to us in love
and now
we also turn to you in love.
Like the sunflower
that lovingly gazes at the sun,
our eyes
are eternally fixed on you
and our hearts
throb in anticipation
of seeing you
in the heavenly world.
We thank you for that hope
and the glorious future
you have prepared for us.
Amen.*