

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, May 8, 2022

The Fourth Sunday After Easter

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl Turner, *Rector*

on

Acts 9:36-43; Revelation 7:9-17

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The Lamb shall be their Shepherd

Today is the Fourth Sunday of Easter and is traditionally known as Good Shepherd Sunday. In the early days of the Christian Church, Jesus was not depicted in art except through symbolic ways; the fish, the anchor, the Greek letters Chi-Rho (later to become the military standard of the Emperor Constantine); symbolic birds such as the peacock or the dove; or a ship sailing on the sea, or a lighthouse. You can see some of those images on the Chancel Screen on the left. It wasn't until the 3rd century that figurative art was used and some of the earliest can be found in the Catacombs of Priscilla in Rome where Christians were buried from the 2nd to the 4th centuries.

That particular catacomb has, probably, the earliest depiction of the Blessed Virgin holding the Christ Child. There are scenes from the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament – Abraham and Isaac; Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace; the feeding of the five thousand mixed with the breaking of the bread; and, most significantly, a woman with her hands raised in the position of prayer and looking up to an image of the Good Shepherd. There we see a young man, beardless and strong, wearing tradition Greco-Roman dress. He is the Good Shepherd and, significantly, carries a *goat* on his shoulders and has two more close-by. It is as if he is saying to all buried there, “*I am the Good Shepherd.*”

At one time, there were over 40,000 bodies in this particular catacomb provided by a wealthy Christian woman underneath her home. Here, the early Christians laid their dead alongside the martyrs and near to an image of the Good Shepherd; rich and poor, young and old, they shared the same space in death as they had attempted to do in life. The infant Church was truly a community of believers – a family. That community, that family, was counter-cultural. As we read the Acts of the Apostles during Eastertide, we hear again the radical nature of the call of Jesus Christ, who died on the cross not for a few, but for the whole world. This radical community is described in our reading from the Book of Revelation that we heard a few moments ago:

“I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.”

Note that it is a multitude that *no one could count*; it is a huge number and we can, therefore, imagine *ourselves* as part of that great throng. Secondly, the multitude is *from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages*. The message of the Good News of Jesus Christ is for *all* people. The Acts of the Apostles reveals the Church growing with people from all over the world, from different social backgrounds and with different languages and customs. As St. Paul says in his letter to the Galatians, “*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*” (Galatians 3:28). The image of the People of God in the Book of Revelation is of a multitude that no one can number and from every ethnic background possible. Thirdly, all of these vast multitude are robed in white and carry palm branches in their hands. This iconography is striking. The white robes could signify purity or faithfulness, but more likely they signify the baptismal garment. St. Paul also says, “*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*” (Galatians 3:27). Being clothed with Christ is to be incorporated into his death and resurrection. At the Easter Vigil, we baptized seven adults and children this year. After their baptism, they were each anointed with the Holy Chrism – the perfumed oil that signifies the outpouring of the Holy Spirit – and these words were said, “*You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever. Amen.*” To which the whole congregation responded, “*We receive you into the household of God. Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood.*”

Confess the faith of Christ crucified; proclaim his resurrection; and share in his eternal priesthood: the vast multitude that no one can number not only wear their baptismal garments, they are also carrying palms in their hands – the symbol of martyrdom. This multitude have died with Christ in baptism in order to share his resurrection. The word martyr means “to bear witness” which explains why the congregation welcomes the newly baptized with the encouragement to confess the faith of Christ crucified and risen. They, *we*, are to bear witness – to be martyrs for Christ.

And then we see the central image of this vision in the Book of Revelation: The Lamb who was slain; the Lamb whose blood has made the robes of this vast multitude white. As an ancient Easter hymn from the 7th century puts it, “*The Lamb's high banquet we await, in snow-white robes of royal state, and now, the Red Sea's channel past, to Christ our Prince we sing at last.*”

The Lamb is, of course, an image of Jesus – our own paschal lamb that was slain upon the altar of the Cross. When we break the bread later on in this mass, the celebrant will say, “*Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us*” and we will respond, “*Therefore let us keep the feast. Alleluia!*” The Choir will then sing the ancient chant, the Agnus Dei, “*O Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us. O Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.*” and then, even more importantly, “*O Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world, grant us thy peace.*” For here is the irony, the Lamb that was slain is also the Shepherd who calls his sheep. The Shepherd gives his life for the sheep; the shepherd is the Lamb that was slain.

As the vision goes on to explain, “*the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat.*” All the conflict and pain of this world will cease – Jesus has reversed the consequences of human sin and greed and will bring new life and hope. The Lamb will bring peace, for as the passage goes on to say, “*the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*”

This vision is how things will be. A new world; a new creation; the old corrupt order finally defeated.

At times, my friends, it must seem as if this vision is simply a fantasy. We see what is happening in Ukraine, and the displacement of so many people from their homes; the horror of war crime in our own time; the poor little children who have nothing; we see the faces of those who are abused and taken advantage of; we see the faces of the poor and the homeless; we see the refugee, the hungry, the sick, and those who feel the weight of prejudice or discrimination simply for being themselves. But the Lamb is also their Shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

And so, my friends, we are to listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd who knows us intimately by name. Jesus, our Good Shepherd is calling you and me now. We belong to him; we wear our baptismal garments but, yes, we are called to hold palms of martyrdom in our hands.

There is a beautiful prayer that we often say in the sacristy or with the choir before we begin the mass; I want to pray it here as we listen attentively for the voice of the Good Shepherd. Let us pray.

Mercifully regard us, O Lord, as we plead the sacrifice of thy Son Jesus Christ. And grant that the feebleness of our intentions may be perfected in the fullness of that intention wherewith he offered himself upon the altar of the cross, both priest and victim, who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, ever, one God, world without end. Amen.