

The 4th Sunday of Easter (Year A): “Good Shepherd” Sunday.

1st Reading: Acts 2:14a+36-41: Peter convinces people to amend their ways;

2nd Reading: 1 Peter 2:20-25: Christ’s innocent suffering healed our sins;

Gospel: John 10:1-10: Jesus allows his “sheep” to find “life to the full”.

I’m sorry if you received the ‘wrong’ homily last week. Many of you will have read material (written in the lockdown 3 years ago) about the Shackleton journey in 1914-16. Oops! I had pressed the wrong button. There was a fresh one, which (I hope) was sent out later. Old age must be taking its toll!

This Sunday’s first reading is another piece from the Acts of the Apostles where St Peter addresses the people with his basic, simple Pentecost message: that Jesus, executed a few weeks earlier, had been raised by God to new life. Peter told them, that to share this new life, they needed to be sorry for their sins, and be baptized in Jesus’ name, when they would receive the Holy Spirit, for a fresh start. Peter had great success: 3,000 accepted his call to baptism.

In the second reading, Peter (by now a very experienced Church leader) deals with a problem faced by many followers: patience in suffering, especially in what he calls “being punished after doing your duty”. He is not saying that such injustice is fair; he says it is sometimes inevitable, and the only thing we can do is to see it as our way of sharing what Jesus went through. That was also the result of evil, but Jesus’ patient acceptance had a good effect – “through his wounds we were healed”. Even so, patience in suffering unfairness is not easy.

The fourth Sunday of Easter is dedicated to Jesus as the “Good Shepherd”. To be fair, when you read this weekend’s gospel, as we’re in liturgical Year A, you notice that Jesus doesn’t call himself the “Good Shepherd” here, but the much less romantic title of “Gate of the Sheepfold”. What does he mean - a sort of divine bouncer?

This idea is not so daft. In the gospel, Jesus mentions that others try to get to the sheep for bad reasons – to kill or steal them. The true shepherd enters by the official gate, and in a big flock in those days, there would have been a gatekeeper to let him in. The spiritual meaning of this (I think) is that there can be many evil influences at work on the sheep – namely us. Some can be silly – like trusting in astrology; others can be more dangerous – like those corrupting the young with porn, drugs, the blitz of anti-religious messages, etc. We deceive ourselves, if we do not realize just how big and effective these influences are. They have always been around, but, just as the internet lets you read material

like this, and get live-streamed Masses into your homes, so it also allows corrupting material on to the phones of teenagers, and others, too.

What can we do about it? At a local level, not a great deal, I'm afraid. As members of the Church, we must examine ourselves, to see how far we allow Jesus to be our "gate" – or guide. Also in St John's Gospel, Jesus talks about himself as "the Way, the Truth and the Life". I suggest that comparing himself to a gate is like calling himself the "Way" – meaning a source of inspiration and information – a person to copy. If we are honest, we know that Jesus should be our 'way' or 'gate' – ie, our guide. It's all too easy to criticize young people when they 'go off the rails' – but how often do we allow other, nastier influences to have an effect on us? Do we fall prey to our own weaknesses – those things which can take us away from Jesus? When I read the colour supplements in the weekend 'posh' papers, I feel bombarded with suggested lifestyles that come across as normal and attractive – when in fact they are materialistic and immoral. Many of us fall for these influences.

There are many good influences (or 'gates') in our lives: family, friends, teachers – even clergy! But for Christians, none of these can match Jesus Christ. He was a man like us in all things but sin – and also truly God. His death on the cross, followed by resurrection, offers us a chance to share in his divine life. We don't always feel that, but, by faith, we know it's true. Due to the presence of the Holy Spirit in our personal prayer-life, and in the Church as a whole, we become part of Jesus' life with the Father. In sacraments like the Mass, we are caught-up in Jesus' act of redemption – a sacrifice of love. At times of crisis, this gives many people a great comfort – for instance, when a loved one has died. A Requiem (or Funeral) Mass does not take away the pain of loss, but it usually offers huge spiritual comfort. In services like that, Jesus "lets us in" to his love for his Father – like the gate giving good people access to the sheepfold.

In the other two liturgical years – B and C – this weekend's gospel has Jesus calling himself the 'Good Shepherd' directly. As I said earlier on, this year's title 'Gate of the Sheepfold' is much less exotic or romantic. On the other hand, in this time of difficulty for our diocese, while we are waiting for a new bishop to be appointed, perhaps we need to be less romantic and more practical. Our diocese and its leaders need some source of guidance for where to go next, and how to get there. Let's ask Jesus for help and inspiration – to be the 'gate' that lets us into a better future. *Fr Jim Dunne.*

