



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after Easter 1 St. Peter 2:19-25 & St. John 10:11-16 Fr. William Klock

April 18, 2021

The Christian life is not an easy thing. The lessons we read during Lent were meant to prepare and to remind us of the commitment that is involved in our baptism into Jesus. There's no sitting on the fence, no compromise. No one foot in the kingdom and one in the world. When you take hold of Jesus, it's with both hands. You can't hold onto Jesus with one hand and hold onto your old sources of security with the other, just in case. Easter reminded us of Jesus' triumph over sin and death and that if we really have taken hold of him in faith, his triumph is our triumph. But it's always the case that the joys of Easter triumph run—smack—into our continuing life in this fallen world. New creation has begun, but it hasn't been fulfilled yet. We run into the world with that Easter joy and people think we're crazy. We try to fulfil our calling as stewards of the good news about Jesus, we try to live the new life Jesus has given us and the world pushes back, opposes, sometimes even persecutes. Sometimes it's just that we still face the problems of this world. Sin is everywhere—and with it all sorts of wickedness and injustice. We live in hope of resurrection and God's new world, but the reality that we still face sickness and death in the meantime. In our Epistle, St. Peter tells us that by Jesus' wounds we have been healed. But by that he doesn't mean that all of our problems are gone. And so as our Easter joy encounters the struggles of life the Church exhorts us today to remember the Good Shepherd and to keep holding tight to him with both hands in faith.

In the Gospel today Jesus tells his friends, "I am the good shepherd." Good—the Greek word—doesn't mean morally good. It means that he's the shepherd who is faithful and does his job. It contrasts with the hireling who runs away when faced by

the wolf. They're not his sheep after all. His investment in them isn't worth his own life, so he leaves them to fend for themselves. Many of Israel's own shepherds had behaved this way, looking out for their own interests rather than the interests of the people the Lord had entrusted to them. Jesus, though, fulfilled the calling his Father gave him. We shouldn't pass over his description of that calling too quickly. Jesus says that the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Here the analogy with real-world shepherding seems to break down, because even if the hireling runs away in the face of danger, no shepherd sets out to protect his sheep from wolves with the expectation that he will die. He may be killed by the wolves, but his hope (even his expectation) is that he will prevail. A dead shepherd is useless and unable to protect his sheep.

And yet Jesus says here that the mission of the good shepherd—*his* mission—is not merely to face danger, but specifically to die. Why? Because he knows his sheep. Again, this is set against the hireling whom, he says, cares nothing for the sheep. To know is to care. And, he says, his own know him in return. And this mirrors his own relationship with the Father: "just as the Father knows me and I know the Father". This all goes back the prophecy of Ezekiel 34. There the false shepherds of Israel are indicted and the Lord himself says, "I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out" (v. 11) and "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep" (v. 15). In the latter part of the prophecy the Lord goes on to say, "I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them" (v. 23). "Which is it?" we might ask. Is the Lord the shepherd or is David? Ezekiel doesn't answer, but in our Gospel today Jesus finally gives that answer. Later in the chapter, in verse 30, Jesus will say, "I and the Father are one." This is finally how it works: the Lord and his Messiah are one; they are both the shepherd.

So Jesus will fulfil the Lord's promise. He will lay down his life for his sheep—and not just the sheep of Israel, but somehow his death will also bring about the fulfilment of that other promise of Ezekiel 34, that the Lord will seek out and rescue his flock from amongst the peoples and countries in which they are scattered. They, too, will know the God of Israel because they have known the good

shepherd and the result will be a single flock.

But how does it work? In any other setting a dead shepherd is a failed shepherd. This is where we need to continue on into verses 17 and 18, where Jesus says, "No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again". The resurrection is the means by which the shepherd will break the cycle exemplified by the false shepherds and finally lead the sheep to the "good pasture" of Ezekiel 34—"where they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel" (vv. 13-14), where the shepherd will "bind up the injured", "strengthen the weak" and "feed them with justice" (v. 16). Only as he gives his life is the shepherd able to rise from death and lead his sheep into God's new creation and because of this he truly is the *good* shepherd who, by his faithfulness, reveals that love of his Father to the world.

Now, what does that have to do with our faithful perseverance as we face the pain and trouble of a fallen world today? Brothers and Sisters, it boils down to this: Jesus reveals God's faithfulness. He's already done the hard part. He's not going to give up at this point. He will finish what he's started. Knowing that, knowing his faithfulness gives us every reason in the world to keep holding tight to him and trusting that he will fulfil his promises.

Now that leads us to our Epistle from 1 Peter. Let me read those six verses again.

For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like

sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Without context we might think that St. Peter is writing about persecution for the sake of our faith. Verse 18, however, puts these verses in the context of slavery: “Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.” In fact, our Epistle is part of a longer passage in which the Apostle exhorts Christians to live faithfully amidst the pressures of a pagan world. He begins in 2:11-12:

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

In verses 13-16 he urges Christians to be subject to “every human institution” with particular focus on the civil authorities. Why? To silence ignorant and foolish people (v. 15) who have spread rumours that Christians are trouble-makers. In 3:1-7, which immediately follows today’s Epistle, Peter turns to wives, urging them to be subject to their husbands, that by their witness unbelieving husbands may be won to faith in Jesus. We know that in the early Church this was a significant means of growth as the witness of Christian wives won over their pagan husbands. Similarly, Peter urges husbands to honour their wives. Our Epistle falls in the middle here, urging slaves to endure suffering at the hands of unjust masters. All of this is brought to a conclusion in 3:8:

Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.

Peter goes on to cite Psalm 34:13-16. “The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous and his ears toward their cry.”

So our Epistle isn’t so much about persecution, but about living in light of Jesus as we experience the pressures of a fallen world that desperately needs our

witness and the good news we steward. The empty tomb is the sign that God had inaugurated his new creation. It’s begun, the age to come is breaking in, but the old age continue to trundle along—and with it all the problems that sin has brought to the world. Jesus is Lord, but corrupt, power-hungry, and unjust civil governments and rulers still govern us. In Peter’s day slavery was still common—in fact the Roman Empire ran on the labour of slaves and it was amongst these slaves that Christians quickly spread. Our world is different in many ways, but in many ways it really hasn’t changed. How are we to live in light of the problems of the world? If the Christian slave is to endure the beating of an unjust master, this sets a pattern for the unhappy marriage, living under a pagan ruler, and a host of other difficult and seemingly impossible situations.

Our first inclination is to express outrage, to protest injustice, to assert our rights, and to fight back. It’s not that there isn’t a place for the Christian to take a stand for his rights or the rights of another, but that Peter saw that in many situations the Christian has an even higher calling. As Jesus reminds us in the Sermon on the Mount, manifesting the kingdom to the world is a higher priority than defending or asserting our own rights. It’s worth noting that the specific situations given in these verses are things over which most people in the First Century has no control. Peter saw such injustice through the lens of the cross, the greatest injustice ever perpetrated by human beings. He goes back to Isaiah 53 and the song of the suffering servant. Jesus accomplished God’s saving purposes for his people by being reviled, yet without reviling in return, by suffering, yet not threatening. Rather, as he faced the false judgement of unjust men, he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He who knew no sin bore on his body our sins. Why? Because his suffering and death was the only means by which we can die to sin and live to righteousness. Sin did its worst to Jesus in his crucifixion, but he came out the other side alive again, bringing the firstfruits of resurrection into the world.

Jesus’ death and resurrection have become the central point of human history, the events on which everything hinges—the moment in time when everything changed.

That means we need to see our own lives, the joys, the sorrows, and the suffering in light of those events. In allowing evil to do its worst to him at the cross, Jesus has caught up in his suffering every last bit of human suffering, including the suffering afflicted upon us and the suffering we afflict upon others, and he has turned it into the means by which he has brought redemption to the world. And here Peter recalls today’s Gospel: through his suffering and death, the shepherd has rescued the lost and straying sheep. He is our shepherd and overseer—our bishop, our chief pastor—and no hireling. He who has laid down his life for our sake and in doing so suffered the penalty of our sins, will hold us close as we suffer the injustices of the world and, in turn, the faith we exhibit in entrusting ourselves to him becomes a profound witness to the world. We can face injustice knowing that as the Judge who judges justly has vindicated Jesus, he will also vindicate us for our faith.

Let’s pray: Almighty God, who gave your only Son to be for us both a sacrifice for sin and an example of godly life: Give us grace that we may always receive with thankfulness the immeasurable benefit of his sacrifice, and daily endeavour to follow in the blessed steps of his most holy life, who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, on God, for evermore. *Amen.*