

## **Fourth Sunday of Easter Year B**

We are now in the Easter Season, which continues until Pentecost.

### **Acts 4: 5-12**

The past two sets of readings from Acts have traced the unfolding story of Peter's confrontation with the authorities after he and John healed a lame man. He has explained what happened to 'the court of public opinion'. Now he faces charges before a judicial tribunal. Evidently, the 'celebrity status' being accorded to Peter and John is a serious threat to public order.

The question put to him is not 'did you do it?', nor even 'why did you do it?', but 'by what authority did you do it?'. For his contemporaries this was a very significant question. Was Peter operating under the auspices of God, or Satan?

Such questions raise, for us, some big questions. Great wickedness has been done by people who could honestly claim to have been 'just obeying orders'. Arguments like these have never held water in a modern court of law. We are free, no matter what our background, to know and exercise judgement about what is right and what is wrong.

Peter, however, does not wriggle like a worm on a hook. He seizes the moment to declare whose authority stood behind him when he told the man to stand up and walk. The dock becomes a pulpit, the courtroom a preaching-house.

Our reading stops short at this point. To find out what happened next, read on ... .

### **Ps 23**

This psalm is set for the fourth Sunday of Easter in all three years of the lectionary cycle. Its place here is linked to the gospel reading about the good shepherd.

In this much-loved psalm we find the image of the good shepherd, guiding the sheep. It seems as if the sheep is very content to have the shepherd do the guiding. Not for this sheep – at least, not any longer – the adventure of striking out on his own, finding his own way in the world. To follow the leadership of the Good Shepherd is to find the places of rest and nourishment after hours of arduous and hazardous trekking.

### **1 John 3: 16-24**

Play a chord on a piano and you will soon know whether the piano has been recently and competently tuned. If not, there will soon be an unpleasant sound of one string 'beating' against another. If this is widespread across the entire keyboard the music will be a nasty jangle.

John the Elder is continuing his pastoral advice to a community distraught because it has split, and many people have gone off, denouncing as heretics

those who have remained faithful. John is aware of the power of inner doubt at times like these, power to undermine the faith-commitment of individuals and indeed of the whole community. When our hearts condemn us, he tells them, God will reassure us.

There is a tension in this passage between the turmoil within and the clear, Spirit-guided action set out in verses 16 and 17. These poor folk don't quite know what to trust, their inner feelings or their confidence in what they do. John does not take sides in this. His watchwords are 'believe and obey'. That way, the strings will all be in tune and there will be no 'beats'.

### **John 10: 11-18**

The Gospel for today is the central part of the extended metaphor of the Good Shepherd. First, Jesus makes clear that one mark of the Good Shepherd is his willingness to lay down his life in order to protect the sheep. He then argues that he is himself the model of a Good Shepherd, because of his intimacy with the sheep ('I know my own', verse 14) and with God to whom the sheep belong (verse 15).

Verse 16 seems like a puzzling digression ('I have other sheep'). Indeed much ink has been spilled in speculation about what this might mean. The most probable answer is that Jesus was trying to prepare his followers for the idea that his mission will extend even to Gentile, a theme taken up by Paul in Ephesians.

Then, in verses 17 and 18, Jesus drops a bombshell. He lays down his life ... in order to take it up again! This may well be a post-resurrection interpretation, emphasising that the death of Jesus was no tragic accident, nor a martyrdom; Jesus was not the victim, but the triumphant victor.