

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES
FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER –YEAR C
‘GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY’

Second Reading Apocalypse 7: 9, 14–17

Information about the Book of the Apocalypse (or Revelation) can be found in last week’s Prego Plus.



Today’s passage shows us St John’s vision of the salvation of the followers of the Lamb – that is Christ – depicted sitting on a throne, as though at an Oriental imperial court. John sees the whole world, people of different languages, cultures and ethnic backgrounds. The

palm branches remind us of the joyous celebrations at the Jewish feast of Tabernacles in thanksgiving for the harvest (Leviticus 23: 40–43).

Commentators do not agree on the nature of the ‘great persecution’ incurred by the people. Some see it as representing the events leading to the end of the world; others think it refers to the socio-economic and religious discrimination endured by those who refused to live according to the Roman Imperial system.

Robes are important garments in the Bible. They not only reflect social status but also reveal the inner person. The striking image of the white robes washed in blood may be a reference to the washing away of sins, as in Isaiah (1: 18): ‘*Though your sins are scarlet, they shall be as white as snow*’.

In an imaginative role reversal, the Lamb becomes the Shepherd offering his flock total protection. The examples given are taken from our everyday concerns: hunger, thirst, protection from the heat of the sun, and sorrow. Here too Isaiah provides the reference: ‘The Lord will wipe away the tears from every cheek’ (Isaiah 25: 8).

Image: Adoration of the Lamb from the Douce Apocalypse (c.1265-70),
Wikimedia Commons



Today is always referred to as *Good Shepherd Sunday*, since in each year of the liturgical cycle on this Fourth Sunday of Easter, the Gospel is always taken from John 10, where Jesus speaks of himself as the ‘good shepherd’.

Gospel John 10: 27–30

Today’s brief extract is taken from Jesus’s final discourse to the people of Jerusalem. It was the feast of Dedication (Hanukkah – see below) and Jesus was walking in Solomon’s Portico, a roofed walkway or colonnade, supported by rows of tall, impressive pillars. It was on the east side of the Temple, overlooking the Kidron Valley and a favourite place for prayer and meditation. Rabbis would instruct their students there as they walked along together. Today’s text forms Jesus’s reply to the Judeans who had gathered round him to ask if he was indeed the Messiah.

‘The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me.’

Jesus replies using the familiar Old Testament idea of the shepherd: a symbol of a good king. Since kings and those in authority often failed in their duty towards the people, John’s emphasis here is on the relationship between the shepherd and his sheep.

Immediately following the story of the man born blind, some say this chapter may be misplaced, but a further thought is that John records these events in this particular order to highlight the dramatic contrast between the ‘blind’, bullying authorities, and the protective, loving Jesus – the Good Shepherd.

‘I give them eternal life’

Jesus promises his followers a life in which he will always be present to them. Whatever happens, they will be secure in his care; no one can break into their relationship and take them away from him; and even death will not be the end.

‘The Father and I are one’

Jesus made these promises to his followers, secure in the knowledge of his unity with God, his Father. He re-iterates this in prayer, shortly before his death: *Holy Father, keep those you have given me true to your name, so that they may be one like us* (John 17: 11).

The Feast of Hanukkah

This feast celebrated the reconsecration of the Temple by Judas the Maccabean (164 BC) after its desecration three years earlier by Antiochus IV Epiphanes. This annual celebration lasted nine days.

