

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EASTER: MAY 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2009

Acts 4:8-12; John 10:11-18

Acts 4:8-12

In this section of the Acts, Luke draws our attention to the apostles. The debate for him is over who has the authority to provide leadership among the people of God. The choices are stark: there is the Sanhedrin or there are the apostles. The Sanhedrin, at the time Luke is writing, was a group of seventy elders, all of whom would have come from the priestly aristocracy around Jerusalem and who were elected to their positions for life by existing members of the Sanhedrin. For Luke, these men were the ones who put God's prophet to death, who had the messiah crucified. Luke paints them as self serving men who had lost the spiritual plot and were more interested in protecting their own positions than serving God's people. In rejecting the messiah they had lost their right to rule.

The other alternative left was the band of apostles, those men who had been chosen and put in place by Jesus, whose authority came from the Lord who called them and not from any group of people. They were not subject to the lawyers and priests but directly responsible to God.

What Luke is doing in the following sequence of stories is show the Church how the apostles became the true and authentic leaders of the faithful Israel and how the Sanhedrin became the rulers of the unfaithful Israel.

In doing this Luke follows a clear theological pattern. We saw from the speeches of Stephen and Peter that Luke sees salvation history in the following way. A man (Moses) is called by God for a task. He sets out on that task but is rejected by the people. He went away but is then filled with the power of God and so returns performing signs and wonders. With Moses, there is later on a second rejection.

A similar pattern is followed with Jesus. He is sent by God as the prophet and is rejected by the people and put to death. But God raised him from the grave. Like Moses he returns a second time to the people, this time he returns through the Apostles who are called and empowered to continue his ministry and mission in the world. Luke shows this same pattern now with the apostles, who are sent as prophets of God but are rejected by the priests and lawyers, the elders of the people. What is God's response to this?

Our story today shows that God steps in and removes the authority of the Sanhedrin and hands over responsibility of leadership to the apostles and to their successors. We see in Acts 4:1-4 that for Luke it is not "the people" (his terms) but the Jewish leaders who rejected the prophet Jesus and are now rejecting those the Lord has sent in his name. It is the leaders who have Jesus arrested and dragged before the Sanhedrin to defend themselves against charges that have been laid. It is this defence that we have in today's reading.

What we have is a clear contrast between the two styles of leadership. The apostles fulfil the predictions about them in that they are persecuted because of their prophetic ministry and that they defend themselves with a boldness that we did not see in Jesus' own defence of himself. Because of the resurrection, these prophetic ministers are filled with power and minister in Jesus' own name. And notice that Peter does not mince words when addressing these powerful men and is shocking in his attack. He accuses them straight out of putting to death the God's holy One, Jesus the Messiah. He applies psalm 117:22 directly to them.....this is...*the stone rejected by you the builders which has proved to be the cornerstone!* How wrong did those leaders get the message and how twisted is their interpretation of the will of God for the people of Israel! Responsibility must now be handed over the apostles, the ones appointed by Jesus himself for the task at hand.

And those apostles take the challenge right up to the false leaders, accusing them of not listening to the reality of the resurrection that is all around them: Look! The lame man walks and the apostles are preaching with boldness. These Jewish leaders do not act with integrity, as they are more concerned about their own positions rather than the needs of the people of God. They are bad shepherds as opposed to the faithful servants of God, men like John and Peter who have been appointed by Jesus and not by some human hand. And so we have the powerful picture of Peter and John refusing to obey human voices, even if listening and obeying would mean a life of peace. They must obey the will of God...whatever the cost. The priests seek to impose their own control through political maneuvering and try to silence the apostles by commanding them not to speak to anyone in Jesus' name. But the apostles are listening to a very different voice. This is the message that we find picked up in today's Gospel reading.

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

Strangely, there does not seem to be an Old Testament background to the Good Shepherd teachings of Jesus, although there is an extensive collection of observations about the bad shepherds who lead God's people into crisis and destruction. These are the bad shepherds who hand the people in their care over to the wolves. What we do find throughout the Old Testament is that God is presented as the Shepherd of his sheep and when the nation was sent off into exile in Babylon, God was seen as the future shepherd of Israel. This is an important insight, that the future shepherd and shepherds of God's people will be acting in God's name, doing God's work and so will need to be themselves in a close and intimate relationship with God.

This is the background to the conflict that we see in this reading, between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees look like shepherds, think of themselves as shepherds, tell the sheep that they are shepherds, but all the time they are "robbers" and "wolves". Why is that? It is because they no longer care for the sheep in the way God wants them to act. They are more interested in keeping the sheep for their own purposes, to have the sheep dependent on them instead of being dependent on God. The Pharisees have tried to make themselves more important in the lives of the sheep than God and there is their sin.

For Jesus, one of the key marks of a good shepherd is his willingness to die for his sheep. It is a ministry that is marked by sacrifice, by a spirit of humble service and a willingness to endure the mud, the cold, the snow, the smell and the dangers of caring for a flock of sheep out in the wilderness. It is no easy task and the sheep immediately come into danger when the shepherd cares more for his own comfort, his own safety and his own life than he does for the needs of his sheep. That is the sin of the Pharisees. Selfish individualism. The hope they offer the sheep is their own hope, their own ambitions, their own agendas and in the end it is the people of God who suffer.

In this parable today, Jesus offers himself as the Good Shepherd, he is the door through which the sheep can pass to find good pasture. It is in him that the sheep are fed, it is in him that the sheep find shelter, warmth, safety and a sense of wellbeing. This is all John's way of describing "salvation". Jesus alone saves. Jesus and the Father are one and the salvation that is found in Jesus is the salvation that has been promised by his Father. And what is the model of the good shepherd, the measure against which all who claim to be shepherds must be measured? A Good Shepherd will lay down his life for his sheep. For John, this is no once in a life time act. It is a laying down of the shepherd's life in every human encounter, in every plan that is made, in every endeavour undertaken. The life of a true shepherd of the flock of God is one that is characterised by sacrifice, a life that is lived at the foot of the cross.

What John does is take this traditional theology even further when he says that it is through the ministry of the Good Shepherd that the world will be drawn into the one flock of God.

The Good Shepherd does not just look after his own sheep. He wants his flock to expand and grow so that there is only one people on the earth and they are all a part of the flock that is cared for by God himself. This is the other mark of one that claims to be a shepherd. They will not only sacrifice themselves for others but will be out in the world bringing others into the flock of God. The ministry of shepherd is not just one for the existing flock. It is a missionary ministry.

He ends with a warning. We are to be wary of those who claim to be shepherds and to be ministering in the name of God but are really wolves. They would split the flock, divide it up and in the end it will be torn apart by wolves. This is what the Pharisees are doing and Jesus warns the people not to be duped by their self-serving behaviour.

### **Conclusion:**

It is clear in these readings that God continues to care for his people. The Son of Man has ascended to heaven and sits at the Father's right hand in glory but his mission and ministry continues on in the world. Jesus is really present in those he calls and empowers to continue what the Father had sent him to do. These men were the apostles and through them, down through the history of the Church, this is the ministry that was handed on to the bishops. These ministries are signs, reminders that Christ is still with his people. They are not the only reminders but their unique position comes about because it was a ministry set in place by Christ himself. In fact, it was the only ministry ordained by Jesus.

As both readings remind us, God calls our faith communities together and empowers men and women within them to provide leadership and ministry. Gathered around the Bishops, these men and women, under the guidance of the Spirit of God, care for, feed and lead the people of God. Their ministries are characterized, not by power and privilege, not by rank and position, but by service, by sacrifice and by a willingness to lay down their lives for the sake of the people they are sent to serve.

It is this spirit of sacrifice that enabled the early communities to grow into the Church we know today. As the Church itself was launched and sustained by the death of Jesus on the Cross, so the Church of today is sustained and grows through the willingness of all who are baptised to follow their Lord in a life of self sacrifice.

We will always have false shepherds among us. These are the people who create division, who foster behaviours and activities which split the one flock of God, and who do what they can to stop the flock being one. Their lives are characterised by self serving agendas. Like the Pharisees, they are blind to the idea that they are called to be listening to God, to carrying out the will of God, to be bringing to people to God through Christ.

But the readings today call all of us to a life of service. We are to unite ourselves with the Risen Lord, to leave behind those things which separate us off from the flock of God and to work on ways of bringing the world into the salvation that is on offer from God.