

Homily for May 14, 2000
Fourth Sunday of Easter Cycle B

By Father Charles Bowes

Acts of the Apostles 4:8-12
1 John 3:1-2
John 10:11-18

We listen to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd.

What did we just do? We said, "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ," sang an acclamation, and sat down. What made us stand? What makes us sit now? What makes us use the words, "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ"? And what's supposed to happen now? What should happen? What have we come to expect will happen when we are all sitting and one person is standing here to speak?

The last couple of weeks, in keeping with the Lord's surprising Easter appearances, we've been reflecting on the surprising presence of the Lord in our midst right now. We talked earlier about how we come into this room, how the church gathers in its house. We talked about how the song and the sign of the cross and the prayer are ways of putting on the baptismal garment, being a congregation, an assembly, that is here to work – to do the work of its liturgy. By the time we finish those actions and sit down to listen to the reader, we have a pretty strong sense that what happens here is done by this church – by all of us together. We have a pretty good sense that this Sunday gathering is happening on a Sunday in Easter time, as differentiated from a Sunday in Lent or Ordinary Time or Advent. The song and the look of the room and the whole atmosphere tell us that.

So we come to the moment when the assembly sits – not a bunch of individuals sitting isolated – but the assembly sits and the reader stands with the book open. It happens each Sunday, but it should still be, every time, a moment of delight for us. Wherever we come from this morning (this afternoon), whatever the troubles, whatever the aches and pains, whatever the worries, whatever the delights, whatever the preoccupations, somehow they all get caught up into the troubles, aches and pains, delights, and preoccupations that are sitting beside and behind and around each one of us. This is a church filled with such things. It is a church about to listen to its book, its story. What kind of a church is going to listen well to its book or to its story? One with no worries? Or one full of the struggles of everyday life? The truth is this: we come here as hungry individuals,

needy people, and when we are all together we are a hungry church – starving maybe – needing to be fed. And so we resonate to the words of St. John's gospel chapter 10 wherein the evangelist likens Jesus to the good shepherd – one who lays down his life for the sheep – who calls each by name. Only in St. John's gospel is the good shepherd described as one who lays down his life for his sheep. And that means nourishment in the form of the glorified flesh and blood of the blessed Lord. And it also means nourishment in the form of the word spoken from this book and about this book.

The words of this book are our food and our drink just as much as the bread and wine. We sit down, and the reader opens the book, and the church is nourished. We know perhaps that the church asks that we not eat for an hour before Mass and communion. That is, indeed, just a symbolic fasting. But it is symbolic of this: that we are to come here hungry for God's word and hungry for the Eucharist and Holy Communion. Each one of us is to decide how we observe that fasting before Mass. In some ways, it means that the Sunday liturgy does not begin with the first singing here, or even with entering through those doors. The Sunday liturgy began when each one of us woke up this morning and in the time from then to now when – by fasting or by other ways – we let our bodies and spirits and minds be hungry for God's word, hungry to praise and give thanks and share Holy Communion.

On most weekends, we read three scriptures. The first is usually from the oldest books of the Bible – the Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament. The second is always from the letters of the New Testament. The third is from the gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. We might think of it this way: as a people, we Catholics travel through the centuries, one generation to another. We carry with us a book. It is a book that we believe is the foundation of our life together as a people. In each generation it is read again and again and again, read in all the different places in times where this Catholic

people finds itself. We see that we are not the only people with such a book. Other Christian churches journey with much the same book; Jews carry a book that contains most of these same contents – and they have carried it far longer than we. Most of our Christian book is, in fact, a Jewish book, and we would do well to understand that and appreciate that and reverence our Jewish brothers and sisters because of that. Now this book that the Catholic people carry has within it a great many smaller books. And they contain all sorts of writings, legends, myths, histories, genealogies, laws, customs, wise sayings, humor, poetry, songs of every kind from love songs to war chants, prophesy, letters, sermons, parables and biographies. Over the course of three years, the book is opened on Sundays to the many parts of this collection. Sometimes, for week after week, we read in order from one book. We do this especially with the second readings. Part of this summer, for example, we'll be reading from the letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians.

In the gospel readings, through much of each year, we go in order through St. Matthew, St. Mark or St. Luke. This order is broken when we come to the seasons of Advent, Lent and Easter time; on some of those Sundays we do our reading from the gospel of St. John. Every three years, then, the Sunday readings give us most of the New Testament. The first readings, except during Easter time, come from the Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament: from Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Kings, Wisdom, Isaiah, Jeremiah and many other books. These first readings often give us a word or an image that will be reflected in the gospel reading. More than anything, these first readings should encourage us to read widely in the Hebrew scriptures, the books we've usually called the Old Testament.

So we are this Catholic people, and we carry with us a book that our parents and ancestors gave us and which we will give to our children – and this strikingly so at First Holy Communion. We read from it alone. We read from it in our households with family and friends. But always we read from it in our assembly. And that reading is not simply for our information or private use. Nor is it just some formality to get through so we can get to the Eucharistic prayer and Communion – no no. The reading is what gives this church its nourishment, even its identity, its life – and that's the hard part. We are used to going it alone; even with the bible itself, we often try to think out what it means to me. But here the word is for the church – all of us gathered – and all the church throughout the world gathered. I listen because I

am part of the church. I listen because if I don't, the church is that much less – so much a part of it am I. So important is the Word proclaimed that we have a separate liturgy of the Word for young children – the same readings, but on their level – and parents who might wish are welcome to join their children until the little ones are comfortable.

So when the book is open – each time it is open on a Sunday at liturgy – we fix our eyes on the reader and we listen. We are supposed to cling to the words, cling to them like life itself, for that is what they are. Any book or booklet that has the readings in it can be read to prepare or to follow through, but when the reading of God's word is taking place in front of us, then it is the spoken words of the reader we want to hear, not printed words on a page. It is common sense and simple respect that tells us to look at the one reading and to hang on to every word – the worship aids in the pews are meant to be used before or after Mass or for private meditation but not to follow along while the reader proclaims. We, the church, listen to its word together with one voice – hanging on that word, for it is life and light to us.

And the readers? Well for our part, we are asked to spend a great deal of time with the scripture text to be read. Readers pore over it again and again. They practice it aloud. They're charged to make every effort in helping the church to hear this scripture. That means that they live with and wrestle with it all week long so that on Sunday or Saturday evening they can let our scriptures come to us from one convinced of their worth and truth.

That part is hard. The part of the assembly, all of us, is even harder. Talk is cheap, we say. We live in a sea of words, and most of them flow right by us. Here we are to have the habit of good, hard, listening. Listen to hear a word you have not let into your mind and heart before. Listen for an image to guide us baptized people. Listen as you would to the voice and words of one who loves you – the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. Don't try to think of how this word fits your life right now; don't try to find some hidden message. Just listen – just relax in the word – let it wash over you like the waters of baptism – like the waters with which we're sprinkled like falling rain at the beginning of the Masses of the Easter season. Just listen. Just be the church coming here, today, on its journey, carrying its book, hungry for the words that are life to this people.

We listen to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd.