

Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year C)(25/04/10)

Today's first reading tells us about Paul and Barnabas at Antioch in Pisidia. They go to the synagogue there and take their seats. You will see from the citation at the top of the reading that 29 verses are missed out between the first and second paragraphs. I have a naturally inquisitive nature, and I want to know what has been left out. The answer is that the President of the synagogue invites the visitors to speak, and Paul then preaches a sermon which skilfully summarises the history of God's dealing with his people. He points out all the ways in which God has acted in the lives of his people in the past, as well as all his promises for the future, and then he comes to the punchline: 'We have come here to tell you the good news that the promise made to our ancestors has come about' (Acts 13.32). 'We have come here to tell you'; St. Paul is very clear that he is a man on a mission, he has a great sense of purpose. He is no casual tourist, he is in Antioch for a reason. He and Barnabas are not there to spout general platitudes, they are there to proclaim some astonishing news, they are there to break the mould, they are there to announce that thousands of years of waiting are over. The world is no longer the place people thought it was. St Paul is a pretty good preacher, and this sermon is a masterclass. He ends up by quoting the prophet Habbakuk: '*Cast your eyes around you, mockers; be amazed, and perish! For I am doing something in your own days that you would never believe if you were told of it*' (Habbakuk 1.5). This is a warning to his hearers that what he has to say is something pretty amazing - so amazing, in fact, that their first reaction may be to say 'No, you can't be serious, that can't be right', but they must look again. Then he stops. That's all for today.

Of course, the people are hooked. As Paul and Barnabas leave the synagogue the people beg them to come back again the following week; they want to hear more. And that's where we rejoin the text in the second paragraph of the reading we have in front of us. This makes more sense of what happens next. The crowds come to hear Paul and Barnabas, but not everyone is pleased to see them. There are some people whose vested interests are challenged by this message, so they will do pretty well anything they can to undermine it. What Paul and Barnabas had to say has made some people very happy, because it has offered them a sense of hope, a sense of meaning and purpose, it has offered them a chance to feel that someone cares about them, at last they feel that they are not outsiders, that they belong somewhere, in truth they have found their way to the heart of God. Others, however, find the challenge too much, and Paul and Barnabas are drummed out of the town. St Paul's preaching at Antioch in Pisidia gave people a glimpse of the divine. For some of them this was all too much; for others it was a moment of pure joy. Either way, they heard something extraordinary in his voice, something more than they were accustomed to hearing.

Let's listen now to some words from the gospel. Jesus has just healed a man who had been blind from birth. The Jewish leaders were furious that he had done this on the Sabbath, and they have rejected this man, thrown him out, for being healed by Jesus. So now Jesus starts to talk about shepherds. This is not a random choice of subject. He is asking people, in effect, what they think of their shepherds. These shepherds have taken out their anger on a man who has done nothing but allow himself to be healed, to allow Jesus to give to him a great gift that he had previously never known. So Jesus now says to the people, let me tell you what a good shepherd is really like, and it is this passage that is split up and read bit by bit on the Fourth Sunday of Easter

every year over the three year cycle. Today we hear Jesus say 'The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice' (Jn. 10.27). Shepherds in Jesus' time wandered around the hills with their flocks looking for the best pasture, and the sheep recognised the voice of their own shepherd when he called, so that they knew where to go. They recognised the voice of their own shepherd, and they followed where he called them. The voice of their own shepherd was familiar and instantly recognizable; it was a source of security, and it drew them to it because they knew, at some level, that it meant food and safety. It had, then, a kind of instinctive magnetic attraction.

Just as the sheep know the voice of the shepherd, and are instinctively drawn to it, so the people of God recognise his voice, and it exerts a magnetic appeal over them. This is what was happening at Antioch in Pisidia. The people listening in the synagogue heard St. Paul, and they recognised in his speech the voice of the Good Shepherd. The challenge to every generation of Christians, and in particular to every generation of priests, is to speak with this voice. Last week the Pope told us priests: 'The voice of the Good Shepherd should always be recognized in a priest' and that is quite a challenge for us. We are, I hardly need to tell you, all too human, and we can be tempted to substitute our own voice, our own words, for those of the shepherd, but while that may bring us praise and popularity for a while, in the end it is always sterile. The world needs the life-giving voice of the Good Shepherd. Naturally, some people will find it too challenging and will reject it; others will find it hard to hear, because in the past they have had bad experience of shepherds, and it will take a lot of time and effort to help them find their way back; still others will find the whole idea of God, of faith, of shepherding, so alien to their experience that it will not be easy for them to understand what we are about; others will be confused by the clamour, by the crowd of voices insisting 'follow *me*' and they will not know where to turn. But in the end there is only one voice that can lead us to safety and to good, wholesome, life-giving pasture; there is only one voice we can really trust, because it comes from the shepherd whose hands, and feet, and side still bear the scars of love and devotion. We can trust this shepherd because, not only does he say he will lay down his life for the sheep, but we can see he has actually done so. He is the shepherd who offers us life in all its fulness: let us listen to his voice.