

## The Fourth Sunday of Easter

Today is Sunday the 25 April, beginning the fourth week of Easter.

Paul Zach sings, 'The Lord is My Shepherd'.

Today's reading is from the Gospel of John.

John 10:11-18

'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.'

In first-century Palestine, sheep and shepherds were part of the landscape. Being a shepherd wasn't an unusual occupation, but a common one, in fact quite a humble one. Today, though, when most of us live in big towns and cities, how many of us know any shepherds? So this image of the shepherd might not mean much to us, or we might react negatively to the "other side of the coin" – that Jesus, by implication, might rather unflatteringly be calling us "sheep"! But how do you react to this image? How do you feel about it? What do you think Jesus is saying about himself, about us, about you?

Jesus talks about the differences between the good shepherd and the hired hand – in the degree of commitment and responsibility, the depth of relationship, the time and care, and even love, that is given – differences that set Jesus apart from false prophets, but that might also prompt me to question myself. What does the image of the good shepherd and the hired hand say about my commitment, the depth of my relationships, the time and care and love that I give?

As you hear these words of Jesus again, listen carefully and see if you notice a phrase that

Jesus uses repeatedly, three or four times in this one passage, that tells us more than anything about his love for us.

“I lay down my life for my sheep”. Hired hands don’t do that. In fact, most shepherds don’t love their sheep that much. But in this season of Easter we celebrate the fact that Jesus does . What do you want to say now to the one who laid down his life for every one of us, for you?

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.