

*These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.*

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### Acts 4:5-12

NRSV

In last Sunday's reading, we heard that when Peter and John went to the Temple to pray, Peter healed a crippled man, who then *walked and leapt and praised God* (3:8), and entered the Temple with them. Peter then exhorted the crowd to repent of their waywardness and "turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord ..." (3:19-20). "While Peter and John were speaking ..." (4:1), the religious authorities "much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead" (v. 2), arrest them.

Now v. 5: the Sanhedrin assembles next day. (The "elders" acted as religious and municipal judges; the "scribes", mostly Sadducees – who did not believe in an afterlife – were experts in Mosaic law and its interpretation.) "Annas" (v. 6) had been high priest, and now is the *power behind the throne*; five of his sons became high priest; "Caiaphas", high priest 18-36 AD, was his son-in-law. "John" may be Jonathan, Caiaphas' successor. We do not know of "Alexander". John and Peter appear before the council (v. 7), and are asked to explain their actions: who empowered you to cure the lame beggar? Vv. 8-12 are Peter's answer. "Filled with the Holy Spirit" may recall Luke 12:11-12, where Jesus says: "When they bring you before the ... rulers ... do not worry about ... what you are to say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you ... what you ought to say". It is "by the name of Jesus" (v. 10), empowered by him, that Peter has cured the man who was crippled. Invocation of Jesus' name has put to flight the forces of evil, including the evil spirits thought to cause illness. Peter quotes Psalm 118:22, a statement of the Risen One's triumph over his enemies: he is the "cornerstone" (v. 11) of the Church, God's agent. (In Luke 20:17, Jesus applies this verse to himself, against the "scribes and chief priests".) Then v. 12: salvation is only available through Christ.

In vv. 13-20, the members of the Sanhedrin are "amazed ... and recognized ... them as companions of Jesus" (v. 13). They note only that "a notable sign has been done" (v. 16) through Peter and John, and the two are ordered "not to speak or teach ... in the name of Jesus" (v. 18). The two tell them forthrightly that they will continue to spread the good news (v. 20).

### Psalm 23

NRSV

In the ancient Near East, the king was seen as shepherd (vv. 1-4) and as host (vv. 5-6). God faithfully provides for, and constantly cares for, his sheep. He revives our very lives ("soul", v. 3), and guides us in godly ways ("right paths"). Even when beset by evil ("darkest valley", v. 4), we have nothing to fear. God's "rod" (a defence against wolves and lions) protects us; his "staff" (v. 4, for rescuing

sheep from thickets) guides us. The feast (v. 5) is even more impressive, for it is in the presence of his foes. Kings were plenteously anointed with oil (a symbol of power and dedication to a holy purpose). The psalmist trusts that God's "goodness and mercy" (v. 6, steadfast love) will follow (or *pursue*) him (as do his enemies) throughout his life. He will continue to worship in the Temple ("dwell in the house of the Lord") as long as he lives.

### 1 John 3:16-24

NRSV

V. 11 says "For this is the message ... that we should love one another." Abel's godly deeds (Genesis 4:8) stirred Cain's hatred for him, even to murdering his brother, so don't be surprised if the "world hates you" (v. 13). For a Christian to hate a fellow Christian is equivalent to murder. "We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another" (v. 14).

Jesus is the great example of selfless love: far from taking life, he "laid down his life for us" (v. 16). How can the love that originates in God ("God's love", v. 17) be in a wealthy person who sees another in need yet "refuses to help"? We need to love *actively*, "in truth and action" (v. 18), not hypocritically ("in word or speech"). (*Truth* and *faith* are synonyms.) It is by "this" (v. 19) love that we will know that we are Christ-like ("from the truth"): our consciences ("hearts") will be reassured whenever we are conscious of sinning ("our hearts condemn us", v. 20), for God knows us better than we do ourselves. But, when we know that we are following God's ways (v. 21), we can boldly present ourselves "before God". As Jesus promised (John 14:12), "whatever we ask" (v. 22) in his name (recognizing his power and authority), he will grant, because we follow God's ways. Jesus has commanded that we believe in his authority and love one another (2:23). Then v. 24: obedience to him guarantees our continued liaison with him. By this love and the presence of the Holy Spirit, given to us by God, we know that Christ "abides in us".

### John 10:11-18

NRSV

Jesus continues to speak of himself as the good shepherd, an image familiar to his audience. True followers, he has said, recognize the good shepherd. "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved ... and find pasture ... the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have [spiritual] life, and have it abundantly" (vv. 9-10). Now he says that he is the "good" (v. 11, i.e. real, proper) "shepherd", the one who dies for his "sheep", his flock. But the "hired hand" (v. 12) does not care enough to save the sheep from the "wolf". (Old Testament prophets spoke of leaders of Israel in these terms, so Jesus probably speaks of them here – shepherds who are not worthy of the name.) Jesus' relationship to people is like the Father's to him (v. 15). Who are the "other sheep" (v. 16)? We can only guess: perhaps they are non-Jews. They will have equal status with those who already follow Jesus, as part of one Church. Then v. 18: Jesus has been given the authority to choose to die and the power to rise again from the dead. He is in control of his own death and resurrection.