

Acts 13:14.43-52, John 10:27-30

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I HAVE OTHER SHEEP

Shepherds

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. In today's gospel, Jesus speaks as the shepherd of his sheep. They hear his voice and no one can take them out of his hand. Shortly before, he had explicitly called himself the Good Shepherd (John 10:11) who defends his flock, attacked by the wolf (10:12). He had also spoken of other sheep: they too will listen to his voice (10:16).

Shepherds are well known figures in the Bible. The forefathers of the Israelites, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, were shepherds. The image of the shepherd is applied to the king who cares for his flock. God is also called shepherd, for example in the well-known psalm 23: *The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing* (v.1). In the Gospel of John, Jesus is presented as a shepherd, as a reflection of the shepherding God.

Not only the Jews, but also other nations

We heard that the Good Shepherd protects his flock from wolves, which will attack and scatter the sheep (John 10:12). The reader for whom John had written his gospel could think here of the Christian congregation of his own day that suffered at the hands of the Jewish establishment. What the first Christians sometimes had to endure, we hear in the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. This book is about the first expansion of the Church. Paul played a particularly active role in it. He travelled to various places in the Roman Empire, where Jews had settled. He always went to the local synagogue to preach the Good News of Jesus. A concrete example of this process is described in the first reading from Acts. Paul and his companion Barnabas arrive in Antioch in Pisidia (in the interior of present-day Turkey). They preached the message of Jesus in the synagogue with such success that the Jewish leaders became jealous and turned against Paul and Barnabas. Both of them now turned away from the Jewish establishment and said: *It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first, but since you reject it..., we now turn to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, 'I have made you a light to the Gentiles, that you may be an instrument of salvation to the ends of the earth'* (Acts 13: 46-47). The Gentiles were enthusiastic. But the wolves had done their work: a division had come about between the Jews and the Gentiles who were delighted when they heard the words of Paul and Barnabas on the one hand, and the Jewish leaders on the other. The two missionaries left Antioch, shaking off the dust under their feet in accordance with the instructions Jesus had given the disciples when he sent them out to bring the Good News: *if any place does not welcome you and*

people refuse to listen to you, as you walk away shake off the dust under your feet as evidence to them (Mk 6:11).

When Paul and Barnabas told the Jewish leaders *that they would be an instrument of salvation to the ends of the earth*, they quoted the prophet Isaiah (42:6, 49:6). Already in the Old Testament the prophets said that Israel had a message for non-Israelites too. This idea returns with Jesus, who spoke of other sheep that would also listen to him (10:16). The riches of Israel and the Christian message are not the exclusive property of one's own people or group.

Christian in a secularized world

The reading from Acts shows how we can live in the world with the richness of our faith. We should not isolate ourselves in our own bubble with our own truth. We are not in a lockdown, cut off from the non-Christian outside world. We no longer live in a society defined by Christianity, but in a modern, secular society. But this does not mean that we have nothing to say. We have our own story, and if we live according to this story, we have a message for our secular society. Wherever justice is done, wherever people are sharing so that some do not have too much and others too little, wherever there is care for one another, there is the Kingdom of God, God's new world. We as Church members are at the service of God's Kingdom, which is greater than the Church. The fact that we are no longer so numerous does not mean that we no longer have any importance for the world. When the Gospel inspires and motivates us to speak out and do deeds of justice and peace, we will be an example and inspiration to others outside the Church.