

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, May 4th 2013

Today's readings include a prayer: "Let all the earth cry out to God with joy". But that prayer is bracketed by the present reality of difficulty: a cry for help from troubled people (Acts 16) and a warning from our Lord that the world may not always be welcoming to those who follow him (John 15).

Today's Psalm contains the familiar imagery of God tending His flock: "he made us, his we are; his people, the flock he tends." The sheep bleat a joyful message: "serve the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful song"; "The Lord is good: his kindness endures forever, and his faithfulness, to all generations." But this entreaty for all the earth to share in this joy is not always well received, particularly by those not among the flock.

Acts 16 reflects the bleating of Paul, as he traveled to preach the Good News to people in regions where they needed to hear it. I am struck by Paul's fervor to follow the Lord, and in this case his willingness to impose on his fellow believer, Timothy, by having him circumcised. (Yikes!) This account reminds us that human culture is an important medium forming our beliefs and practices, including our faith. As a Jew, Paul would have known this culture well and the problematic nature of receiving communication about God from one who did not share this same commitment to an outward sign of following God, which had such deep roots in their culture. Paul would not be limited in his vision to share among these Jews: he would go wherever God would call him, including helping the Macedonians who needed to hear the Gospel. This passage shows us that sometimes the other sheep may bleat for our help. Are we listening for them? Can we hear them? Will we be like Paul and get a move on to help them?

And finally, our Gospel today contains a warning from our Lord, the Good Shepherd, who speaks from his experience: "If the world hates you, realize that it hated me first." There are other sheep who are bleating not to receive or to join us, but to oppose and persecute us. So we should not be so surprised when this happens. But it is astonishing, isn't it? When one considers the Good News of this Good Shepherd, whose kindness and faithfulness endures forever, whose love endures forever, it is a puzzle that so many are offended and full of rejection. Can the deal they have worked out really be working out so well that they can afford to reject the offer from the Good Shepherd? Of course it is not. Yet we are charged to bleating with joy, in spite of the reaction we might encounter.

Fellow sheep, bleat for joy that God has chosen you out of the world to serve Him with joy. And let us all pray fervently that the Good News will be preached and lived, even so boldly that we are willing to

penetrate the culture of those around us who desperately need to hear it.

Edward Morse