

# Fourth Sunday of Easter

Sunday 11 May 2025

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Imagery is essential in the scriptures to convey understanding and meaning, and to express what we believe about God and God's interaction with us. The dominant image presented to us today is that of the Good Shepherd.

- Psalm 23 with its opening words *"The Lord is my shepherd, therefore can I lack nothing"* picking up the classic theme in the Old Testament that speaks of Godly leadership as shepherding the people. It is a beautiful and well loved Psalm in which God's provision and protection are the example of this shepherding care.
- The Gospel passage is a continuation of the image of Jesus the Good Shepherd: *"My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."* [John 10.27-28] Jesus is the one who not only cares but gives life to those who follow.
- In the Acts reading we do not have a specific reference to the shepherd, but we read of Peter faithfully fulfilling the role of a caring shepherd of God's people as he prays for God to heal Tabitha, a prayer that is answered encouraging the community of disciples.
- The most interesting reading we have today is from the Book of Revelation, *"for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd"* [Rev 7.17] In this book Jesus is the Lamb of God and the source of all life and wholeness.

It is this passage from Revelation that we will focus on now because it is full of images and ideas that can be traced from the Old Testament and yet speaks of the risen Christ as the way. Nothing about reading this book is set out in a convenient simple logical order. Rather, it is like stepping into a meandering river that takes you in unexpected ways and directions.

As the first verse of this book state, this is a collection of heavenly visions given to John of Patmos. They are steeped in biblical references and imagery and yet there is not a single direct quote of any scripture. Instead, we are invited to read Revelation as a work of art where "imitation and combination" of past images, voices, and texts might come together into something new. So, with Revelation we are not invited into

a cohesive narrative but welcomed into a world of imagery and reference that opens new imagination for what God is doing and will do.

So, what have we been given today? What are the images that today's passage from Revelation gives us to help our understanding of God's action in Jesus for the world? (We need to remember the scene of what is described in this vision is Heaven before the Throne of God.)

1. **A great multitude.**

People too numerous to count coming from every possible place in this world. This is in dramatic contrast to the Old Testament idea of Israel as the chosen people. Here everyone is included as having the possibility of being part of the multitude.

2. **Robed in white.**

This is an image of Jewish rites of purification but more significantly for us an image of Christian Baptism. Traditionally, the one being Baptised wears white to symbolise the purity of God's grace and their new life as one of God's people.

3. **Palm Branches.**

Often used as a sign of victory, this is a reference to Jesus riding triumphantly into Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday, five days before his crucifixion. Jesus' death and resurrection are his triumphant victory for humanity. Those who share in his redemption share his victory.

4. **Angels.**

Angels are messengers of God and, along with all the hosts of heaven, worship God. Their whole purpose is summed up in these two things.

5. **The Elders.**

It is only a brief reference here but earlier in Revelation we learn that there are 24 Elders – 12 tribes of Israel and 12 apostles of the Lamb. This is an image of the old covenant and the new coming together in united praise of the one true God.

6. **Four Living Creatures.**

These appear in the Prophecy of Ezekiel where they each have four faces and identify as Cherubim and are believed to be God's Throne bearers. In Revelation the same four faces are named but are distributed one each to the living creatures. Christian tradition has taken these to represent the Gospels:

Man = Matthew focusing on Jesus' humanity and incarnation.

Lion = Mark representing Jesus' courage and resurrection.

Ox = Luke representing Jesus' sacrifice and high priesthood.

Eagle = John representing Jesus' divinity as Son of God.

## 7. The Lamb.

This is a repeated image from the Gospels seeing Jesus as the sacrificial lamb that was offered at Passover. The Festival of Passover was about God saving his people from slavery and giving them freedom, taking them from certain death to new life. Jesus died at that festival and is the one who through his death brings freedom and new life to all who believe in him.

While you may not remember all the details of this rich symbolism in the Book of Revelation and our Christian tradition, the last verse of today's passage gives us the essential clue to it all. Speaking of the great multitude of believers John says:

*"for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd,  
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,  
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."* [Rev 7.17]

As we continue to celebrate Easter, the joy of the resurrection, we are reminded that faith in God has its reward – joining the great multitude which no one can number – sharing in the promise of life and resurrection, being shepherded by the Good Shepherd, and being called to offer this hope to all people with encouragement and joy.