

4th Sunday of Eastertide (A)

3rd May 2020

‘Good Shepherd — Mary — Joseph’

Acts 2: 3000 added to their number. Ps 22: He guides me along the right path ...
1Pt 2: you had gone astray like sheep, but now ... come back to the shepherd ...
Jn 10: anyone who enters through me will be safe: he will go freely in and out ...

A lot of things are jostling for our attention, today, this 4th Sunday of Eastertide, quite apart from our constant concern for those caught up with the illness of the virus, and our constant question: when can we get ‘back to normal’ ... when can we get back to Mass?

First, it’s ‘Good Shepherd Sunday,’ (taken from the Gospel passage for this Sunday, from Jn 10) and as such it’s also Vocations Sunday when we remember and pray for members of our Catholic community studying, or called to, the priesthood and religious life. Then, also, it’s a just a couple of days since May 1st, the feast of St Joseph the Worker (I’ve left his statue here for the time being). And as it’s May, it’s also the month of Our Lady — in normal circumstances we’d have the holy rosary before each Sunday Mass, we’d have the May Procession, and we’d have our little parish pilgrimage to the Aylesford shrine in Kent this month. Well: none of those activities together will

be happening (not for now, anyway), but still, all those themes, devotions, and focusses for May and for this Good Shepherd Sunday are as relevant as ever. Let’s address them, one by one, and draw out some devotional opportunities for this unfortunate time of isolation, lockdown, and closed churches.

(1) The image of the Good Shepherd is always a powerful one, and endearing one, isn’t it? For the Jewish people, close to the land and to farming and to the rearing of animals, the image had a direct appeal. At times in the past, Moses and King David had also been shepherds. Christian saints, too, have been shepherds! — think of St Patrick, or St Bernadette! No wonder Jesus used the image of Himself. And if the Son of God wants to be seen as a tender and loving shepherd, by the same token so too do the bishops of the Church (which is why they carry a pastoral staff, or crozier), and likewise the priests who assist the bishop in his shepherding. Today, then, is a day to remember the tender closeness of Jesus our Good Shepherd to His flock, and to give thanks for that closeness of Jesus to us. It’s a day, too,

to pray for our Catholic leaders, for Pope Francis, our own Cardinal, Vincent, and for all the bishops in England & Wales as they make sure that we are able to re-open our churches as soon as possible, and safely. We pray for the seminarians, especially of Westminster, scattered as they are, at present, unable to be in the seminary, but managing, — in unusual settings, like the rest of us — to continue their preparations for serving as pastors to Christ’s people. Additionally, today, I think we should pray to the Good Shepherd for our Government leaders, who have the unenviable task of making huge decisions daily regarding the health, and the economy, of the nation — may Christ give the Prime Minister and his key ministers of state the gifts of wisdom they need to make those decisions well.

This Sunday’s psalm for Mass is perhaps the most recognisable of all the psalms, Ps 22(23), ‘The Lord is my Shepherd.’ Let’s use it now, as a meditation to pray for these intentions, that the Lord Jesus, who is our shepherd, “revive our drooping spirits” and bring us safely “through the valley of darkness”: *The Lord is my Shepherd*, ...

(2) The second theme for this Sunday, the first Sunday in May, is this month’s devotion to Our Blessed Lady: ‘May is the month of Mary,’ as the hymn goes. Surely the best possible Marian prayer — in addition to the [Pope’s prayer for this time of the virus](#) — for this time of isolation is the rosary ... an ideal prayer for home, or for walking too ... and one of the most enduring of all devotions in the Church, going back centuries. If you aren’t habitually using your rosary already, look it out, leave it out, take it up, pray it! If 5 decades seem too much all at once, then pray the occasional decade at intervals through the day. It would seem to me that there are so many intentions needing praying for at this time, that are ideally suited to invoking Our Lady’s intercession, especially as we reflect on her maternal compassion as the holy mother of the Jesus. We seek her intercession, first, for our parish’s mothers with their extra burdens of caring for their families and children through this lockdown. We honour Our Lady as ‘Health of the Sick,’ so we should be asking her prayers for those suffering illnesses. The numbers in hospital with the virus

have thankfully dropped, but there are still many who are critically ill. We style Our Lady also, 'Comfort of the Afflicted,' so let's ask her through the praying of the rosary also for those thousands in our country who bring care to the sick and frail: Drs, nurses, other healthcare workers and care-home workers, that they be kept well themselves as they care for others. And finally let's use our prayers to Holy Mary also to ask her intercession for the teachers, particularly of our own parish Primary Schools: for the two Heads, and their staff, as they seek to keep up their teaching for our children in such difficult conditions. Please do take up your rosaries in this coming month, for these and for so many other pressing needs. For now let's say a 'Hail Mary' for these great intentions ... *Hail Mary* ...

(3) Finally, we return to St Joseph, whose beautiful statue stands here behind me. Patron saint of the Universal Church, patron saint of workers, patron saint of the dying, patron saint of a happy death. Alongside our Blessed Mother, he is understandably a popular saint with the Christian people. At this time, when there are two national

conversations pulling us in seemingly opposite directions, with a tension that is hard to reconcile — the nation's health, and the nation's economy — we would do well to appeal to the prayers of St Joseph, that just and patient man and strongly protective Head of the Holy Family: for our parish's fathers, especially if the burden of earning the family's living falls mostly to them; for the protection of jobs and livelihoods in a time when spending is down and much of the economy is on hold; and for those dying especially if current restrictions tragically prevent those coming towards their earthly end from being with loved ones, that St Joseph may provide a saintly, protective, presence and reassure them of Jesus's closeness. There is a very [ancient prayer to St Joseph](#) that exists, and I commend to you at this time. Please God, may this month, May 2020, despite our distance from each other, and from church, not mean a distancing from prayer and from Christ our Lord, His blessed Mother, and her holy husband. So, let me end with that prayer, *O St Joseph, whose protection is so great* ...