

**Reflection on the Readings-Fourth Sunday of Easter Year B
(John 10:11-18)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

The gospel reading, like the first reading from Acts 4, is ostensibly about leadership. It has some resonance for me. When I was a child, my siblings and I used to spend our weekends and holidays herding the cows, just being with them and keeping them safe as they grazed on the edge of the roads around the Macedon-Gisborne district. We liked our cows, even if we didn't want to spend all day with them. Each one of our small herd had a name and a personality. They were ours. They knew us and we knew them. We weren't shepherds, but we came close to being an Australian equivalent of the good shepherd of the ancient world pictured in this gospel passage.

Strangely enough, for the earliest readers of John's gospel, the term "good shepherd" was something of a contradiction in terms. Most shepherds were known to trespass on the property of others. They thus broke the law and were considered "unclean" according to the Jewish purity laws. A positive image of the shepherd is nonetheless present in Israel's prophetic tradition. The leaders were expected to shepherd their people wisely. Those who failed to do so were castigated: "You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them (Ezekiel 34:4)." That was no way for leaders to act. This passage from Ezekiel provides a small window into the value that was placed on the lives of the sheep. Israel was called to shepherd the whole of God's creation.

The gospel assertion, "I am the good shepherd" probably picks up all the various resonances of the image in Israel's sacred scriptures. The notion of "one flock and one shepherd" has its background in Jewish hopes that at the end-time the Messiah would bring together all the scattered people of Israel and gather the nations to Jerusalem. We have here a wonderful image of resurrection inclusivity and hope. "Laying down one's life" for the sake of the other and doing it willingly is central to the process of creating "one flock" and of leading the way to a thoroughly interconnected gospel community of love and life. "Listening" is likewise affirmed as the way towards creating a unified community: "they too will listen to my voice". Listening includes the capacity to hear and to act. Sometimes we need to expand our capacity to hear so that our listening might lead to life-giving action. To my mind, listening to one another, listening to the cry of the fractured Earth community and listening to the word of the gospel is the key to finding life.