

3 May 2020

4th Sunday of Easter (A)

Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:20b-25; John 10:1-10

The shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out ... he walks ahead of them, and the sheep follow him, because they recognize his voice.

It's ingrained in us that whenever we hear our name being called, we immediately look to wherever it's coming from. Whether we recognize the voice or not, it's a pure reflex to look in that direction, because whoever the person is might be calling us, trying to get our attention. And sometimes they're calling someone else with the same name, or we might mishear and think that they're saying our name when they're really saying a different one. The point is, we don't even have to think whenever we hear our name—we immediately respond in some way.

Every year, the Fourth Sunday of Easter presents us with the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, in particular, in our reading from the Gospel of John, chapter 10. In John's gospel, Jesus does not really use parables like in the other gospels; instead, he likes to give long discourses, waxing theological about who he is and his relationship with the Father.

But this passage is the closest to what amounts to a parable in John's gospel: Jesus using images and metaphors that would be readily understandable by people at the time. First, Jesus sets up a contrast. He says that thieves would exploit the herd for their own profit; they would climb over the fence and thus avoid the shepherd at the gate. Instead, the shepherd stays at the gate and leads his sheep out to safe pasture, by calling them by name. He walks ahead of them and they follow him, because they recognize his voice.

Now, note that in the part of the discourse that we heard for our reading, Jesus actually doesn't call himself the Good Shepherd quite yet. Instead, he calls himself the gate for the sheep. What does this mean?

Jesus is obviously using a metaphor here: that he is the way through which the sheep, all of us who believe in him, enter into abundant life, eternal life through relationship with him. But there's another layer of meaning here. At night, the shepherd would sometimes physically lie down at the gate itself in order to protect the flock. Thus Jesus is saying that not only does he lead us to the pastures of eternal life, but he also protects us and saves us from the threats of sin and evil, the “thieves” which can steal our life with God.

The fact that Jesus our Good Shepherd calls us by name, this impels us to recognize his voice and follow him as he leads us on the paths of our lives. This Sunday is also the World Day of Prayer for Vocations, in which we pray for a more generous and courageous response to God's particular call in people's lives.

But first and foremost, we are all called, each and every one of us, to holiness. This is basically what Peter called people to in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. He said, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is made to you and to your children and to all those far off, whomever the Lord our God will call.”

That universal call to holiness is lived out by each one of us according to our particular calling, our particular vocation in life, whether that is to marriage and family, single life, consecrated religious, priesthood, or other vocations in the Church and in the world.

Discernment of our vocation in life can be difficult. God's call to us may end up being drowned out by other “voices”, for example, voices of fear or doubt. We may even think we hear our own name in these other voices, but they may not be leading us to that abundant life that Jesus our Good Shepherd promises us.

In his letter for the World Day of Prayer for Vocations this year, Pope Francis wrote this: *The risk involved is real ... fear of failure, of not being up to the call, can threaten to overwhelm ... The Gospel, however, tells us that in the midst of this challenging journey we are not alone ... What frequently hinders our journey, our growth, our choosing the road the Lord is marking out for us, are certain 'ghosts' that trouble our hearts. When we are called to leave safe shores and embrace a state of life – like marriage, ministerial priesthood, consecrated life – our first reaction is often from the 'ghost of disbelief'. Surely, this vocation is not for me! Can this really be the right path? Is the Lord really asking me to do this?*

But Pope Francis encourages us to keep our eyes, our ears, and our hearts open and focused on Jesus, who leads us on our way, no matter what fears or difficulties we face.

For me, these last several weeks have actually been a source of blessing in their own way. I think this situation has invited me to get back to some basics in terms of my share in Jesus's priestly ministry, especially with attempting to preach some sort of coherent homily each day (hopefully).

I've been able to put a bit more time and energy into homily preparation, including reading some Scripture commentaries, a few books off my shelf that I told myself I would get to someday. I also do watch myself after every Mass that we livestream now; it's the first time I've done so since my preaching and sacraments practica in seminary, when we would record ourselves, watch the video in class, then evaluate ourselves.

So yes, I do know that I have some mannerisms or patterns when I preach, and that I can perhaps be a bit didactic or even long-winded for daily Mass. (It's the risk you take when you preach without notes.) I'm being nourished by God's word myself, and I do truly love learning more about our faith and about our Church, history for example, and I love sharing it, as long as people find it beneficial in their own spiritual lives, especially during our current state of affairs.

Jesus the Good Shepherd **knows** his sheep personally, intimately. He knows us better than we know ourselves, and he leads us by calling us by **name**, even in the midst of the trials and dangers of life.

I'll close with one more quote from Pope Francis's message for today:

May [the Church] touch the hearts of the faithful and enable each of them to discover with gratitude God's call in their lives, to find courage to say 'yes' to God, to overcome all weariness through faith in Christ, and to make of their lives a song of praise for God, for their brothers and sisters, and for the whole world.