

Discerning the True Voice

Texts: Acts 4:5-12
1 John 3:16-24 (Series B, 4th Sunday of Easter) Ps. 23
John 10:11-18

Prayer :

"I know my own, and my own know me"

Jesus' life and teachings are full of surprises. He came to a generation of people who were expecting a *"conquering-hero" type* of Messiah, and He told them that the Messiah would suffer and die as a common criminal. What a surprise! He came to a generation that, like ours, was steeped in the philosophy of revenge - an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life.

He told them to turn the other cheek; to go the second mile; to love enemies, pray for them, and forgive them. What a surprise! Jesus says that if we deliberately set out to save our life, we will lose it. What a surprise! Jesus' teachings are full of surprises like this, but probably none greater than the one St. John refers to in today's Gospel Lesson. In it, Jesus depicts His relationship with us in terms of Shepherd and sheepfold. This is not surprising. Jesus frequently employed this imagery because sheep were the principal occupation of his people. If we are to learn from today's text, as the people of Jesus' time understood well, we must think about the relationship between a good shepherd and his flock. For us, it seems to come to us as a big surprise, however, of not being able to enter into the Good Shepherd's sheepfold except by just one gate.

Here they are, in symbolism now, their eternal destiny being determined. And what is the question? It's not a question of how often they had gone to Church. It's not a question of what theological books they had read. It's not a question of what academic degrees they had earned. It's not a question of how much money they had possessed. It's not a question of what part of the city or what part of the country or what part of the world they had lived in. It's not a question of skin colour or physical attributes. These questions are not raised. There is only one question. Just one question!!! Did you feed the hungry? Did you take care of the sick? Did you visit those who were in prison or in special need? That's the only question? What a surprise! The more so because worship and belonging to the Church and to study groups and making an honest living are very important, and we know they are. But, in the end, it comes down to this: God places the highest value on the simple ministry of fulfilling other people's needs.

We want a sense of perspective here. Don't we? Jesus is not saying that this is the whole Christian life. He is saying that this is where it comes out. This is the fruit of all of the *effort*, the fruit of all of the *worship*, the fruit of all of the *prayer*, the fruit of all of the *Bible Study* and the *theological probing*. This is where it comes out. This kind of love, as Paul said, is the one thing that lasts beyond all others. And if we don't have it, then we don't really have anything. We need to understand it in this perspective because Jesus does not bring this teaching to us as a *threat*. It comes to us as a *promise* - Having a *"quality"* of life with God.

On the prairies, ranchers bring their cattle to a common grazing ground, known as a 'Feed Lot.' On those feedlots, you will find hundreds of cattle mingling around feeding from early summer to after harvest or just before winter sets in. When the time comes for the rancher to take his / her cattle home, they sort the herd by the brand marks on their skin.

During Jesus' time, shepherds mingled their flocks into one large flock for easier movement from one grazing area to another. Each shepherd called to his sheep, from time to time, when they were lambs. The sheep leaned to know the shepherd's voice, and they would follow him, when he called them out of the sheepcote (*sheep pen or enclosure*).

The fact is, there are many voices out there in our world today, each telling us what to do: We have the voice of God, the voice of Satan, our own voice, and voices of other religions promising us '**God within**' etc.

Our Good Shepherd's job is never done. The demands on real living shepherds are constant and endless. Sheep are peculiarly needy and helpless creatures, quite restive, and even self-destructive at times. They can stand still for hours or bolt into a stampede because an apple drops unexpectedly from a tree.

The shepherd must keep *continuous* vigil against disease, insect infestations, predators, pecking-order fights, escape artists, water, and food supplies. Sheep will not lie down unless they are completely content and secure. A special oil mixture that the shepherd prepares and swabs (anoints) around *each* sheep's head and nose keeps deadly insects from burrowing and causing panic, disease, and injury, and the sheep are calmed for at least a little while. Then there are shearing and lambing seasons...*

The sheep know their shepherd's voice, and it comforts them. Do we know the voice of our Shepherd? Do we stand by as those in our own or other flocks are in need and refuse ~ or neglect ~ to give help? Jesus, as Peter told those in religious and political authority after the Crucifixion, was the Cornerstone of our Salvation, rejected and executed by them. But Jesus, the Good Shepherd, stood firmly and peacefully, in the midst of their persecution, and laid down his life for us, his sheep.

The sheep recognize the voice of a stranger and will not follow. With all these confusing voices around us today, it is imperative that we know the right voice to follow, and the only way to find that right voice is through what it says in the Scriptures, I believe. Those who had been baptized "devoted themselves to the apostles' *teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers*" [Acts 2:42].

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake" [Psalm 23:1-3].

We who want to know ourselves as true and faithful Christians must rouse ourselves from our sheep pen and listen for the Voice that *calls*, and then *follow*, in earnest and in confidence. All we "have" on this earthly plain is temporary. Let us not go *astray like sheep*, but rely only on the Lamb of God, Jesus the Christ, Risen and Eternal.

If we were to read the Gospel of John 10 (which I encourage you to read), taken line by line, we can see, feel, and almost hear Jesus, our Shepherd, with us, reviving, caring, comforting, and anointing; watching over us, preparing our table, restoring us; nothing we need is withheld.

Some days I feel pretty sheepish and need that still small voice of God as a reminder to get back into the flock, to follow and, in confidence, abide in the one who abides in us.

Just as God knows each and every one of us from the time of conception to birth, he called us through our parents, pastors, Sunday school teachers, and godly people. There is no question that Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

The only question that remains at this point in the service is this: *Do you know the Shepherd?* How you answer that question determines the quality of life you have with God and where you can expect to spend eternity.

Jesus is telling us that the most important thing for us to do in attaining this quality of life is to take seriously this ministry to those in need. The outstanding characteristics of this Good Shepherd are that: *He cares for us. He knows us. He died for us. Amen.*



Prayer concerns: *Matilda Molyneau-Piper, Wess Bourgaize, Johannes Eidnes and family & COVID-19 patients, essential workers, and frontline workers.*

Let us pray:

Almighty God, Master of Creation, as You have anointed us for all the days of our lives, infuse us with the desire to walk the right pathways, gather all Your sheep into one flock to love, serve, and abide in and through the Risen Christ. We ask this through Jesus, our Shepherd and Redeemer; and the Holy Spirit, Sanctifier of our souls; who together with You, reign as One God, forever and ever. Amen.

Make melodies in your heart with these hymns:

- Christ Is Risen! Shout Hosanna! # 383
- The Lord's My Shepherd # 778
- The King of Love My Shepherd Is # 502

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