

Homily – Fourth Sunday of Easter (Good Shepherd Sunday), 3 May 2020

If I were a concise pastor, I would sum up the message of today's lesson from Holy Scripture in three simple words.. and then sit down! Those three words would be: "LISTEN and FOLLOW". However.. since I am anything but concise, you know I will not be sitting down at this point! One of the common complaints of people who struggle with prayer is that "God does not hear me!" What we really mean is: "God is not giving me what I want!" We pray and pray, and it seems to us to make little difference. Whatever we may think, though, the Good Lord *always* hears us; in fact he not only hears us, but he actually *listens to us*, to every word and desire that is contained in our innermost being. Hearing is something that happens *to us*; we hear the rain as we lie in bed at night; we hear the noises of children playing outside. This is a passive process. Listening, on the other hand, is active – *to listen to* someone, to listen to God, speaking to us in our hearts. Not one of us can dare say that we "do not have time" to do this, in the present circumstances!

The people of Israel knew what it was to listen. Consider the words of their charismatic leader Moses, after he had delivered to them the Ten Commandments in the desert, "Listen, Israel: the Lord our God is the one Lord. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength." (Deut 6:4-5). Those first words – "Sh'ma Israel", still serve today as the centrepiece of Jewish morning and evening prayer. Listen and follow. Only if we are truly engaged with Him, only if we are truly attentive to the voice of the Lord in our own hearts, can we discover His will for us, and can then follow our vocation, or calling in life.

Take Simon Peter, for instance. Having denied Jesus, during Our Lord's darkest hour, the hapless apostle is redeemed and reconciled with the Risen Christ at the end of John's Gospel, and having listened to Him, He discerns his new vocation: the fisherman becomes a shepherd, who is now called to feed and look after the flock of the Lord. Peter has undergone a change, or to use the Greek term, a *metanoia* (literally, "beyond the mind", as in something that is transcendent). It is thus from the fruits of his own experience that Peter can talk in his First Pastoral Letter about what Jesus has done for us:

"He was bearing our faults in his own body on the cross, so that we might die to our faults and live for holiness; through his wounds you have been healed. You had gone astray like sheep but now you have come back to the shepherd and guardian of your souls." (1 Pt 2: 20-25)

Little wonder that today, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, is also known as 'Good Shepherd Sunday'. In our Gospel passage from St. John (10:1-10), Jesus tells his disciples the parable of the sheepfold, and he uses the following image: "I am the gate of the sheepfold". The sheepfold represents the Kingdom of Heaven, comprising the People of God, the sheep. The only way to gain entrance to this Kingdom is through Christ Himself, the gate. Where does this image come from? In Jesus' time, shepherds would sleep near their sheep, to protect them from wild animals and from thieves. Often the sheep would be contained in a makeshift corral, and the shepherd would sleep across the entrance, making sure that no-one could gain access to them.. and that none of them could stray outside. The sheep are able to follow the shepherd because they recognise his particular voice; they listen out for it. Having discerned it, they then follow him. As Jesus puts it, "When he [the shepherd] has brought out his flock, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow because they know his voice. They never follow a stranger but run away from him: they do not recognise the voice of strangers."

By actively listening to the voice of the Good Shepherd in our own hearts, and following that voice, we are guided "along the right path", and led "near restful waters" and fresh, verdant pastures (Psalm 22). He is always there for us with his crook and staff – the crook, to pull us back when we go astray and to keep us united with Him (hence the shape of a bishop's crozier); the staff, to protect us. Let's make a real effort to listen to the voice of the Risen Christ, particularly during this 'privileged time' of lockdown, and to follow that voice as it calls us to a new life in Him.