

Sermon Easter 4 Year C 2019

The image of the Good Shepherd is one of the most enduring and endearing images of Jesus in the whole biblical tradition and Christian spiritual tradition: the shepherd who protects and gathers, and who lays down his life for his sheep. In fact, some of the very earliest visual depictions we have of the Lord, from the second and third centuries, indeed show him this way.

The gospel portion we have just heard proclaimed today picks up on this image. And while quite short, is packed with theological and spiritual significance. And the centre of this text focus on this idea of the 'voice': '*my sheep hear my voice.*' What is about a voice? The great John Henry Newman once said that '*sometimes a text – a written word – can leave us cold. But a voice can melt us...*' I'm sure you know what Newman means. We read a text, an article, a carefully laid out argument. And we might think to ourselves, oh yeah. I get it... But when *somebody* starts *speaking* the same argument (perhaps the same as what you have read in the text), when *somebody* speaks to you, there *is something* about the voice that causes the heart to stir.

How wonderful and strange that Christianity is not a set of ideas. It is not a philosophy or ideology. But rather Christianity, deep down, when we cut through everything else, is about a relationship with Someone. Someone who has a voice, Someone who speaks. If we go right back to the start of our faith, it doesn't go back to the musings of a philosopher. It certainly doesn't back to the speculation of a social theorist or a political activist. Christianity began with this little band of people who sat at the feet of this Jesus of Nazareth listening to his voice. Saint Paul tells us that *faith comes from hearing*. Faith doesn't come from within. It doesn't come from a welling up of our own thoughts and ideas and musings. It comes from hearing.

So important is this idea of 'voice' in the Christian tradition that the Gospel writer John (who wrote the gospel portion we have heard today), says that Jesus is the Word of God. He is the living, eternal Word spoken by the Father. In other words, Jesus is the living *voice of God*. And in this Easter season it is worth remembering that it is in the voice of the risen Lord - when he speaks - that the disciples recognise Jesus. When they hear his voice they know that their crucified friend and teacher had conquered death. At the empty tomb he speaks the name: *Mary*; in the upper room, *Peace be with you*; Last week on the lake shore, his word to Peter and his fishing buddies, '*throw the net out*'. It is Jesus speaking - his voice - that gives the assurance that '*it is the Lord.*'

These first disciples were privileged to hear the voice of the lord Christ. But 2000 years later we are still the sheep of his fold. We too hear his voice, and in a number of ways. We hear him in a special way when we hear the scriptures proclaimed. Have you ever wondered why we stand for the gospel? Why do we process the Gospel book through the church? Why do we honour it with incense and with a kiss? Because we believe Christ *speaks to us* through the Gospel. We hear the gospel read, we hear his voice! As catholic Christians we do not simply read the bible as part of our private devotion at home. No. The privileged place to read the bible is precisely here, in the context of the Eucharist, where we *hear* the bible, where we *hear* the voice of the Lord.

But we also hear Christ speak in the living voice of the church. This is the constant embodiment of the apostolic faith. This voice takes particular shape in the teaching office of the church. Ultimately this is the only way to adjudicate the disputes in the church. We can't in fact keep on appealing to the bible. We all read the same Bible, and we all come up with different reading and interpretations and understandings. So to assess the controversies and issues each age must face, we seek to be informed - and in fact directed - by that living voice that runs through the church down the centuries. In the constant teaching of the church we encounter the living voice of Christ.

But we can also hear the voice of Christ in the conscience. Again, John Henry Newman quite beautifully called this, '*the aboriginal vicar of Christ in the soul.*' And how true that we call conscience - believers or not - a *voice*. Our moral sense we do not tend to think simply as a matter of taste or intuition, but as a voice that speaks to us. Now, in the Christian vision of things, the conscience we seek to listen to is not just gut instinct or feeling. Rather, the conscience we seek to listen to is a *formed* conscience and formed precisely by those things we have just looked at. A Christian cannot appeal to their conscience if it goes against the scriptures or the teachings of the church.

And we might also hear the voice of Christ speak to us in good spiritual friends. In those people who comfort us and challenge us and keep calling us to higher ideals, encourage us when we fall. If we are open to it, they too can be the voice of Jesus speaking to us.

Christ speaks to us. But we must learn to hear him. Sheep, as innocent (and frankly stupid) as they are, are still able to distinguish the voice of their shepherd. And so must we.

Amidst the cacophony, the noise of competing voices around us we need to distinguish the voice of our shepherd. I have most of you in church for just over an hour a week. But the 167 other hours of the week we are surrounded (and influenced!) by voices which largely seek to undermine everything you hear in here. Voices from media, TV internet, magazines newspaper, radio. Voices from workmates and neighbours and even family members. Voices from films. Voices of politicians, (especially loud at this campaign time!). All trying to gain ascendancy over your life. And mostly seeking to undermine the little voice the church manages to have in your life. The great question of our age, (and perhaps the critical question for our young people who have only ever known a world of cacophony) who will you follow? Which voice will you listen to?

Those who are trained in the Christian faith, who submit to its teachings and disciplines, get a feel for, acquire a capacity to discern the voice of Jesus amidst all these competing voices. There are plenty of gurus and guides who want your attention, devotion and (money!). We need to train our ears to hear the right sound, to listen for that which rings true. And we can only do that if we are sufficiently exposed to and formed by the voice of Christ: through the scripture, through the teachings of the church, through our consciences, through mature spiritual friends.

In listening, we hear the voice of the shepherd, and as Jesus tell us in the gospel today, we are led to eternal life. Why are we listening to Christ? Why are seeking to discern his voice above all others? If we do this, yes, we become better people. Yes, we help to make the world a better place. Yes, we become more just and fair, more committed to the way of peace. Yes, all that is true. But if that's all there is to it, then that's no difference to following any other philosopher or guru or spiritual teacher. But we seek to listen to Jesus, to hear his voice, to follow him, because *he is leading us to eternal life*, to renewed and transformed life with God, when we come to see God face to face. We cannot forget the supernatural ambition of Christianity. That's where the good shepherd is leading us. Heaven is never reduced to earth in the Christian vision of things. Our faith cannot be reduced to mere this-world ethics, or social justice, or therapy, or psychological wellbeing. And believe me there are plenty in the church who try to sell that line! No. the Christian faith is about a journey that will lead us to the heavenly homeland. If you hear the voice of the Lord, allow him to grab you by the hand and allow him to lead you to our eternal homeland. That is why listen out for the voice of the good shepherd. That is why we follow him. Amen.