

Fourth Sunday of Easter – A
[Acts 2: 14a, 36b-41; Psalm 23; 1Peter 2: 20b-25; John 10:1-10]

For many weeks now we have been following the directives of the Chief Medical Officer as we grapple with COVID-19. What I find striking in this is our willingness to be led. In many ways we have grown accustomed to self-direction, based upon an assumption that our only necessary guide is personal will and desire. Yet COVID has forced us to admit that we need to be led by people who understand something of what is happening and can be relied upon to tell us what we must do to move beyond this pandemic.

This sets the stage for today's Gospel passage from St. John, the beginning of the beautiful teaching of Jesus in which he refers to himself as the Good Shepherd. Together with the other sacred texts we've heard, it goes to this very point of our willingness to be led, in this case by Jesus himself, who always knows all that is happening and who can be relied upon to lead us to the fullness of life and joy. Today is Vocation Sunday, when we recall the wondrous truth that the Good Shepherd calls us to follow him as his sheep, his disciples. The question is: are we willing to be led?

At first we might find that a strange query. In his first letter, St. Peter speaks of Jesus as the Shepherd and guardian of our souls, the one, in other words, who leads us to eternal life. Why, then, would we ever be unwilling to be led by the Lord? But we should not too easily assume that the world's predilection for self-determination does not have an influence on our thinking. It is a very powerful current flowing through our times, and can easily influence even those who want to follow Christ.

We've seen this play out in the history of the Church. The reading from *Acts* tells us that, in response to Peter's preaching, there was an enthusiastic and united response by the crowd; three thousand people were baptized and entered the Church. However, we know from subsequent history that it was not long before the centrifugal forces of self-centredness and personal wilfulness began to pull people away from Christ and thus threaten the unity and mission of his Church. Our willingness to be led by Jesus, therefore, is not something we can take lightly for granted. It is, rather, something we should examine closely under the gaze of Christ and allow him to reveal with his light and overcome by his love any resistance on our part to his call.

In point of fact, the Lord wants to do just that. In the Gospel he speaks of himself as not only the shepherd who leads his sheep, but also the gate by which those sheep pass from the narrow enclosure of self-centeredness to that borderless pasture of joy. The call of the Lord – whether to priesthood, consecrated life, marriage, the single life or to the many ministries of the Church – is always a call to joy. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus leads, he takes the initiative. If our hearts are open to hear and receive him, he will take care of everything else, gradually overcoming by his love the weakness and resistance he knows lie within our hearts.

Now, there are many things, of course, that we can say about the working of Christ in our lives to call us to himself. The Gospel for today draws our particular attention to recognizing his voice, so this will be our focus. Jesus himself says that his sheep are those who "know his voice," which begs the question: how do we recognize it, where do we hear it? Let's go back to our experience of listening to the Chief Medical Officer (CMO). Weeks of daily press briefings have

enabled the citizens to recognize the distinct voice of this official. In virtue of the habit we have developed of daily listening, that voice has become very familiar; we know it when we hear it. Jesus wants us to recognize his distinct voice, too. This does not come to us, though, from televised updates. We need to turn instead to where his voice can be heard, so that we might “tune in” daily, if you will, to hear and recognize the voice of the Shepherd. His call comes to us in the depths of our hearts. To say this, though, is to signal a difficulty, because there, in our hearts, resides also a host of competing desires and distractions. How do we discern the genuine call of the Lord from other self-serving impulses?

Here again, what we are learning from listening to the CMO can help us appreciate how the Good Shepherd is at work to help us listen accurately to him. We hear the CMO’s voice for only a few minutes, which leaves us wondering if we heard correctly, if we understood all that was said, and so on. To assist us, the government has reserved space on its website for written records of all that has come forth from the CMO’s office. We can go to this deposit of information and measure against it everything else we might be hearing, and in this way be sure that we are listening accurately the voice of the one designated to lead us through the pandemic. Similarly, when it comes to listening to the voice of the Shepherd, we are often unsure if we are discerning correctly, if we are truly understanding what we are hearing in our hearts. Well, the Lord has arranged that in the Church, too, there is a “deposit” through which the voice of the Shepherd continues to echo. We call it the deposit of faith, by which is meant Sacred Scripture, the apostolic preaching, and the creeds, doctrines, and liturgies of the Church; it includes the witness of the saints and the voice of legitimate authority. The call of the Lord must be carefully discerned. We can do this by an honest examination of our hearts and then, with the help of a good spiritual director, assessing what is echoing within in the light of the sacred deposit for assurance that we are accurately hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd.

When we do know how the Lord is calling us, we should not be surprised at some initial resistance on our part, at an unwillingness to be led. After all, when the Good Shepherd calls, he asks for everything, for an entire surrender of our lives to him. But this is no reason for fear. Jesus loves us beyond measure and, as the Good Shepherd, leads us only to green pastures, as the Psalmist of old once said. Pope Benedict XVI put it beautifully when he said there is no need to be afraid of following Christ; in choosing to follow him, we lose nothing and, in fact, gain everything! So, we trust in him, follow, and let his love for us take care of everything else.

When the Chief Medical Officer speaks, we do not expect her to address each of us personally or by name. Yet, that is precisely what Jesus does; he calls us by name. So, on this Vocation Sunday, let’s pray for the grace to recognize his voice as he calls each of us personally to the fullness of life and joy, and to follow him without reserve in the full conviction that, since he is our Good Shepherd, we need never have any fear.

Most Reverend Richard W. Smith
St. Joseph’s Basilica (livestreamed)
May 3, 2020