

Fourth Sunday of Easter: The Voice of the Lord

In the United States, most of our ranches are self contained. By that I mean that the rancher has his own fields for crops or grazing and his own facilities to care for his livestock.

That is not the case in the most of the rest of the world, not just the ancient world of Jesus, but even in the modern world. In much of the world, the animals belonging to various families are kept together in a large pen. This is particularly true regarding sheep.

Now sheep all look pretty much alike, perhaps except to each other. So if there are 200 sheep in a pen, how is a shepherd able to pick out his 50 sheep? Actually, it is the sheep who do the work. The shepherd just stands at the entrance of the pen and calls to his sheep, or perhaps he just sings to them. His sheep know his voice and follow him out. If he is going through the hills and comes across another shepherd with his sheep going in the opposite direction, the sheep will mingle together. Each shepherd will just keep singing or calling, and their own sheep will follow their Master's voice.

Jesus says that he is the Good Shepherd. His sheep know his voice. We are His sheep. We know His voice. We know if something we hear is coming from him or from another source.

There are many voices in the world. We have to listen carefully for the voices that are coming from the Lord and for the voices that are not the voice of our shepherd.

There is the voice that says, "You can do this or that now. Everyone is doing this. Join in. What makes you think that you are different?" Or, perhaps the voice says, "Times have changed. Get with the modern way." This voice is tempting us to destruction, self destruction. If we follow it, we wander away from Christian morality in order to be part of the world. Soon, we realize that we have wandered away from our own happiness. That happens when we follow a voice that is not the voice of our Shepherd.

There is a voice that says, "This is right for me. I'm following my conscience." Not really. We might be following our selfish desires, but not our consciences. A middle age man and a lady half his age once came to see me and told me that their consciences called them together. They wanted to be married. He had just left his wife and four children. He was sure that God wanted him and his new lady together. He said his conscience was telling him that. Not all desires come from the conscience. Some come from selfishness. We can easily deceive ourselves in taking courses of action that do not exhibit the way of the Lord.

Then there is the voice that says, "If it feels good, do it," This is not the way of the Lord. Following the voice of the Lord is often a challenge, a battle we have to put

up against the world around us and against the selfishness within us. When we listen to the voice of the Lord we will have to embrace suffering, as Peter says in today's second reading. But we will be able to sleep well now in this world and eternally in the next.

There is also a voice that says, "In life, it is dog eat dog. This is the way of the world. You are either stepping on someone on your way up, or you are getting stepped on. You are either raising yourself up, or you are falling down." This is quite obvious in the business world, but this voice is not limited to the business world. As followers of Jesus Christ, we know that any voice that leads us to hurt others is not the voice of the Lord.

I want to tell you about another voice that causes great destruction. This is the voice within ourselves that tell us that we are not good enough. This is not the voice of the Lord. The Lord is merciful. He sees our failings, our sins, and he offers us his Divine Mercy. The voice of evil tells us to give up and stay in the mud. The voice of the Lord says, "No, we can beat this together. Don't give up. Get up." Listen to this voice: "Don't give up, get up." Isn't that what the Lord said to that women who had been caught in adultery. Do you remember the story? A woman was caught in the very act. They dragged her to Jesus and threw her down in front of Him. They wanted to see where his kindness would be since the Law said that such a woman had to be stoned to death. But the accusers all left when Jesus said that the one without sin should throw the first stone. So, there she was, lying on the ground, lying in her shame. She was waiting to die. She probably wanted to die. But Jesus saved her from herself. "Rise and sin no more," He said to her. "Don't give up, get up," He says to you and me. This is the voice we need to listen to. This is the voice of the Lord.

In *Philippians 4:13* St. Paul writes, "I can conquer all things in Him who empowers me." And so can we. There is a voice that tells us that we are not too weak to live the Christian life. There is a voice that tells us to trust in God. There is a voice that tells us that Christ is calling us to new adventures in holiness, to new heights, to a new relationship with Him.

Today's Gospel forces us to ask ourselves, "Whose voice is it that I am following? Is it the voice of the immoral elements of our society? Is it the voice of the popular but self-absorbed? Is it the voice of our own selfishness? Or do I follow the voice of the Lord?"

As always, we pray today for the courage to be Catholic.