

Homily For the 4th Sunday of Easter - Year B

St Peter's Sunday 10/12/5 Masses - April 25, 2021

Acts 4:7-12 "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

Psalms 118:1-29 "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

1 John 3:1-2 "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God."

John 10:11-18 "I am the good shepherd, who lays down his life ... I know my own and they know me."

The Voice of the Shepherd

Introduction

I don't know anyone who spends much time around sheep. I always have mixed feelings about being compared to sheep in Sacred Scripture. They are not that bright as animals go, and they don't seem to think for themselves. However, they do have a quality that serves them very well. In fact, it assures their survival better than any other quality they could have. They know just how to trust the one person who CAN ensure their survival - the shepherd - who makes sure that they have enough food, and that *they* don't become food for a wild animal or a poacher.

Today is the 4th Sunday of the Easter season. It is also traditionally known as Good Shepherd Sunday. Every year at this time, the Gospel passage is from the Gospel of John, Chapter 10, where Jesus speaks of *himself* as the **Good Shepherd** and refers to his flock, his sheep, as those who hear his voice and follow him.

The Shepherd's Voice

The thing about sheep is that they know what sounds their shepherd makes. It's their own secret language. That's important because they follow his voice and no one else's. They don't know what will happen if there is a threat. They don't know whether the shepherd will risk his or her life to protect them or whether he is just working for wages and will take off running when he sees a wolf coming. They don't know if he has shears in the company.

Have you ever thought about the voices inviting us to follow them? There are a lot of strange voices out there. We need to decide which voice we will follow. Unlike sheep under a shepherd's care, we are free to leave Jesus any time we want. We are free to get used to and follow any voice we want. We can literally or virtually follow anyone on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, whatever.

One time, most of the people around Jesus stopped following him. He asked those closest to him if they were going to leave also. Peter spoke for the rest of them when he said: To whom else shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Do you hear what Peter was saying? They were often confused and they did not know everything that was going to happen, but they had come to understand that there was no one under heaven to whom they could entrust themselves more than him.

Why, then, should we follow the voice of Jesus? What does he say about himself that we should follow him? "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry." "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness." "I am the gate. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will find pasture." "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die."

To Pilate Jesus said, "I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." And to the disciples, he said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. I lay down my life and I take it up again." Now they knew that Jesus gave new health, new hope and new life to others. But they didn't know yet what we know. Jesus willingly laid down his life. He is not a victim. His death is a deliberate act of self giving love. Only God himself, who has absolute power over life and death, could make such a claim and then actually fulfil it.

Always On Trial

The first shepherds of the Church were the Apostles. They were given the shepherd's voice to lead the Church. They were to act in his name.

But the Sanhedrin leaders challenged Peter and John's authority, asking "by what power or in whose name have you have acted." They were put on trial by the same people who earlier tried Jesus and who later tried and stoned Stephen. A crippled man was healed by Peter in the name of Jesus. During that trial, Peter received the Holy Spirit for his reply. This fulfills Jesus' prophecy that when disciples are dragged before authorities, the Spirit will teach them what to say.

The Sanhedrin is helpless in trying to answer Peter. They are spiritually bankrupt. When they gave 30 pieces of silver to Judas to betray Jesus, they purchased their own condemnation. Their one task was to shepherd the people into holiness, to lead people to God, their true king. What did they do instead? Recall the trial where Pilate had asked, "Shall I crucify your king?" They sold their soul and made the devil their king when they answered him, "We have no king but Caesar." Today, we might want to ask whether we should follow the Caesars of this world.

Peter's accusers can't deny the healing. John is already the second witness that was needed in court, and many others saw the healed man. They can't contest Peter for saying he must obey God rather than them. In fact, they agree with him on that. All they can do is meekly tell Peter and John to stop preaching in the name of Jesus. Like that was going to happen.

Jesus was on trial every single day of his three year ministry. He was judged guilty every time he forgave sins or turned death into life; Every time he transformed the Sabbath day from a superficial observance into a truly holy day of Jubilee; Every time he fulfilled all the prophecies, the ancient longings and hopes of a people. Testimony was brought against him every time he did things only God could do.

I am not sure how many people realize this, but the Christian faith has been on trial in our culture for a long time. The goal of the accusers of Jesus and his followers today is to silence the voice of the shepherd. There is a concerted effort

to remove the Christian faith from the centre of culture. We hear those voices loud and clear: "Religion is a private matter between you and God." Religion is the cause of most wars." "Religion was rammed down my throat when I was growing up so I will let my kids make up their own mind." "I am offended by other people imposing their religious images on me in public." Our response must be that of Peter: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among human beings by which we must be saved."

Name Above All Names

The powerful name of Jesus is the focus of this episode of the healed cripple and the trial over it. The Hebrew form of his name is 'Joshua', or Yeshua, which means 'Yahweh saves'. This name is invoked in Acts to heal the sick, perform signs and wonders, drive out demons and administer Baptism. Our psalm passage today, from psalm 108, is fulfilled in Peter and in the Church: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." He it is who is the stone rejected who has become the cornerstone, not of a building made by human hands, but of the new covenant, God's voice made flesh and blood, which was sacrificed for us.

Today Jesus Christ is still the name by which we must be saved. Saved from what? From the anxiety and fear that is all around us? Yes. From an uncertain future? Yes, for sure. Will we be able to face what's coming? Yes, if we listen to the voice of the shepherd, who proved his goodness, and everything he said about himself, on the cross. I have come to believe that we will be crushed by the anxieties of the present time if we stop listening to his voice. This is the voice that John speaks of in his first letter: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God.

What's Your Vocation

We also call this Sunday, 'Vocations Sunday' because it is a particular time of prayer for vocations to the priesthood and religious life, for men and women to step forward and be shepherds. But we have come to realize that everyone has a vocation, a calling, to participate in shepherding people and situations around us.

We have some great shepherd priests, but it's not only their task to echo the Good Shepherd's voice.

There was a young man who radically changed the direction of his life because he thought he was called to the priesthood. But then he left seminary to date a long time girlfriend. But then she broke up with him. Confused, he asked God: What am I supposed to do? His answer: Serve those around you. Come to the sacraments. Live well and wisely.

And if we are to ask where we will hear the voice of Jesus, the shepherd? He gave us a book. But not just a book - an account of how God's plan of salvation has been worked out right in the heart of human history. He also gave us a Church. But not just a human institution, with its human failings, and even some false shepherds. It is the very presence of Jesus, where we learn his name and his voice in the sacraments, in the priesthood, in our own acts of love and self sacrifice. We know his name. And he knows us by our name: beloved daughter, beloved son.

In the catacombs of Rome there are many drawn images of Jesus with a lamb over his shoulders. The Christians buried their dead and celebrated mass in the same place. They prayed that Jesus would carry the souls of their beloved to the Father. Our prayer today is the same, that he will shepherd us and bring us to the Father.

This week there is no substitute for spending time listening to the shepherd, in his word or at mass or in prayer. What's the tone of his voice? It won't happen by accident or by what Jeff Cavins calls the 8th sacrament, "holy osmosis." We have to actively listen. This week sit down and listen for the voice of the shepherd. In an anxious time, it is a sure defense, a sure comfort, a sure inspiration for holy and fulfilled lives as beloved sons and daughters.

Key Verses Today

Collect: *Almighty ever-living God, lead us to a share in the joys of heaven.*

Acts: *While Peter and John were speaking to the people about the resurrection of Jesus, the captain of the temple arrested them. The rulers, elders and scribes inquired: "By what power or by what name did you do this?" Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers of the people, let it be known to all that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among human beings by which we must be saved."*

Psalm: *O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His steadfast love endures forever. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in humans or in princes. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.*

1 John: *See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.*

John: *Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have the power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.*