

Fourth Sunday of Easter 2023 A

Think of someone you love, and imagine the sound of that person's voice. When we know someone well, we become familiar not only with words they speak, but even their sighs and coughs, their favorite expressions and tone of voice. "The sheep follow the Shepherd," Jesus says, "because they recognize His voice." The Gospels do not describe what Jesus sounded like, and of course no technology existed 2000 years ago to record Him. Yet we are Christians because in some way, we have heard Jesus, inviting us to follow.

What does the Voice of Jesus sound like to you? In my own prayer life over the years, I have never heard an audible voice from God. Some people do have this experience, though it is generally rare. Usually, it is an inner sense hard to put into words, that assurance that this is Jesus speaking to me, the Good Shepherd. Like the Incarnation itself when the eternal Word took on our human nature, so Jesus usually continues to speak to us through human voices in the life of the Church, His living Body.

Ultimately, this is the purpose of the Church – to make the Voice of Jesus heard among the many other voices that clamor for our attention with His message of truth, love and mercy. You know well that it is a noisy world ... marketers, politicians, newscasts, and conversations – even homilies! – bombard us with words. Songs, billboards, advertising jingles crawl in our ears and replay themselves over and over. So many distractions can drown out the Good Shepherd. All those competing voices create one of the great questions of today – *whom can I trust? Who has my best interests in mind, who will speak the truth without any selfish motives or deception?* People become unsettled and confused by opinion and rumor and persuasion when social media and blogs and the Internet shape our attitudes and preferences so strongly. It is critical to be vigilant about what and whom you let into your homes and your hearts.

The most reliable way to come to recognize that voice of Jesus is prayer ... with patient time and practice, we learn to discern how Jesus speaks, even His breath which is the Holy Spirit. Sometimes that Voice challenges and calls us to change; sometimes it consoles and calls us to persevere. Sometimes it is clear

and powerfully moving; sometimes it is subtle and yet persistent, a whisper like Elijah heard in the cave that speaks quietly, but with love that gives us strength.

It can be hard to hear the Voice of the Good Shepherd in the accent of the stranger, in the pain of the sick, in the requests – spoken or not – of those who need help. We might also miss the Shepherd’s Voice in those who are familiar to us – in our families and neighborhoods and workplaces. As attentive disciples, we want to listen for His voice not only in prayer, contemplation, and worship, but also to hear Him speak in the events, persons, and circumstances of our daily lives, and to respond with Mercy to those around us ... that is often a far greater challenge.

One beautiful way to begin a time of prayer is to speak the words of Samuel in the Temple: ***“Speak, Lord, Your servant is listening.”*** But it would also be good to repeat those words when the phone rings; when we go into the meeting; when spouse or parent or child or friend begins to talk to us and we feel too busy to hear ... ***“Speak, Lord, Your servant is listening.”*** We ask today for the help of the Holy Spirit so that the words of Jesus may be true for us: ***“My sheep hear My Voice. I know them, and they follow Me.”***