

St Pius & St Anthony Homily 4th Sunday Easter Year A1

“I hear you Jesus”! At least three times in this reading Jesus emphasizes the importance of listening to His voice! In verse 3 (of this chapter 10 of John), He says, “sheep hear his (good shepherd’s) **voice**”, followed by verse 4 where He says the “sheep follow him, because they recognize his **voice**” and then in verse 5 once more Jesus adds His sheep “do not recognize the voice of strangers” (*so they know the difference*)! I especially like how Jesus even doubles up the close familiarity He desires for us by Him saying, that 1) they recognize His voice and 2) He calls them by name. Isn’t that doubly comforting, a familiar voice, speaking your own name – that is a sign of truly belonging to Him-Jesus.

So again, I say, “I hear you Jesus”. But from the reading, I wonder if the Pharisees got the message? I don’t think so. Interestingly, I think the gospel writer John is getting a dig in here against the Pharisees, when he says in verse 6 “*Although Jesus used this figure of speech, they (Pharisees) **did not realize what he was trying to tell them.***”

But as good sheep, we should hear His voice! He is our Good Shepherd. Now, I have never owned sheep to know how good they can be about recognizing their own shepherd’s voice, or not. But I have watched a neighbor farmer, who when he drove his tractor with a round bale of hay pull on it, into the feed area of the field, every cow responded by gathering around him (Another time, I saw a farmer who could simply pull his truck into the field, opening the gate and the cows would swarm around it **They knew the sound of their shepherd!** (*I don’t figure they did that when the veterinarian’s truck pulled into the field.*) So, even though I never had any sheep to experience firsthand this “voice name” recognition, I did have a dog for almost 19 years. But I can’t say she was as responsive as these good sheep mentioned in the gospel today. I don’t know if it was her or me that didn’t perform/score well in obedience school, but at times I could call her name and she would run the other way/to go hide playing games. The earliest awakening, I had with her was a few weeks after getting her, I was perusing in Joseph-Beth bookstore in Lexington, Ky, and I found a whole series of book volumes dedicated to different dogs, so I bought her edition on Miniature Pinschers (It had great pictures- I could point and say ‘that’s you-ears and all’). And what do I read on the second page, “*This breed is not recommended for first time pet owners: Pinschers are strong willed and independent*”. Every bit true!

So, her (Simonetta) hearing my voice and responding even when I called her by name didn't work for us, *until* much later in her life. In fact, it didn't really start happening, until she was losing, or lost her eyesight, that she developed good sense of listening, hearing my voice and turning toward it. Then, I could walk into room, call her name and she would rise and come toward the sound. (as kind of sad note here too, even later as she lost her hearing too, I could walk into the room with her sleeping, and just sit down quietly, and give her a minute, and it was so interesting to watch her head shoot up like a periscope from the bed. She smelled me, or sniffed me out in the room. She relied on that sense of smell, and I am sure that in addition to answering the shepherd's voice, the good sheep also can smell their shepherd, & sniff out a false, impersonating shepherd (*or like in the Aesop fable, they may sniff out the difference when it turns out a wolf in sheep's clothing sneaks into the field*).

But Jesus tells us more than a couple of times in today's gospel how his sheep tune to His voice and he calls them by name! How personal and close a shepherd we have! But that should lead us to keep our ears turned and open toward, hearing His voice and every word that comes from His mouth. Which with such close listening to today's reading, some people get confused over Jesus' words when He "I am the gate" (Jn 10:7,9) and then a couple lines later, also "I am the good shepherd (Jn 10:11) Well, which is it? Shepherd or gate? They would seem to be two different things! But they are the same thing for a "**Good Shepherd**". A good shepherd would be both, 1) a caretaker tending the sheep needs, and 2) the protecting watchman-gatekeeper for them.

What I mean by this suggestion is that in the time of Jesus, shepherds were nomadic and followed moved pastures following the greenest fields, to allow the sheep to graze and forage the best food. They were on the move (like free range sheep) , and were not kept in well-defined, enclosed pasture lots with secure fences. So, when the shepherds of Jesus' time needed to shelter overnight, they would arrange a natural enclosure, Maybe using a cliff or rock hill face as one wall, or a stream as another boundary, and then stack up limbs, logs, & sticks together for a third side fence, and after creating those three walls, the shepherd would lay down lengthwise on the ground to make the fourth wall. He was the gate/door, for the enclosure. It the best set-up might be to find not too deep a cave, or cleft in a hill, and after leading the sheep in, the shepherd would lay down at the entrance to make the door-gate in and out. This gave a literal

dimension to Jesus words, later when He says that a good shepherd 'lays down his life' for His sheep (Vss 11, 15, 17, 18). He does **lay down** as the front line, the exposed and endangered one at the head of the sheepfold, to face off predators coming after the sheep. But that is what makes Jesus the good shepherd for us. He identifies with His sheep, knowing their names, and they know His voice, while He gives Himself to them by laying down with them in field, and offering His life first at the front of their pen against attackers. But that means that as Good Sheep, we need to stay close to Him, keep our ears opened & listening to Him and respond, when He calls that we may follow where He leads!