

As I was praying through today's readings, I was grabbed by the first line of today's Gospel. There, Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice." It sounds so easy, but anyone who has regularly attempted to pray knows that it often seems like the opposite is more true. Sometimes when praying, I feel like I am listening to one of those old transistor radios. I keep adjusting the dial, but all I manage to find is static.

Whenever this happens, I find myself getting frustrated in prayer, wondering if it is worth the effort since I do not seem to be hearing anything. Today's words challenge me, however, to not give up and dig deeper. Jesus takes it for granted that we should be able to hear his voice. If this is true, then it means that any failure to hear His voice is on our part. This means that we must go back to the basics and rediscover how to pray if we want to hear His voice.

While it is true that we can and should pray at all times, it is important that we begin to set aside a certain amount of time each day for prayer. Even in the natural realm, if we only practiced a sport or hobby irregularly at random times, we would never get better and eventually give up that activity out of frustration. In the same way, if we want to develop a prayer life, then we need to become disciplined in prayer. This works best if we set aside a set amount of time for prayer at the same time every day. Even if this is only for ten minutes, the regular discipline will allow us to develop prayer "muscles" that will make it easier over time to pray.

The first challenge of this prayer time will be eliminating distractions. This is no different than it would be for any conversation with friends. Think of how many times someone has tried to talk to us while we were watching tv or using our phones. Despite our best intentions, we will always end up missing most of the conversation. Prayer is no different. We must turn off our phones and every distraction and enter into a place of quiet, whether this is a chapel or a set prayer space in our homes.

When we eliminate these exterior distractions, we will probably discover that there are many interior distractions to overcome as well. We might be consumed with thoughts of the things we have to accomplish or other problems that we are facing. We must learn how to eliminate these distractions so that we can better enter into prayer with God.

While everyone will have different things that work best for them, there are certain things that can aid everyone in eliminating distractions. First, we should choose a time of day when we have less inner turmoil, such as the early morning or after we have exercised. It is also useful to begin our prayer time with the same body position or introductory prayer so that we begin to develop a habit that tells our bodies and minds that it is time to pray. Finally, we should allow any remaining distractions to be fodder for prayer by offering them up to God as part of our prayer.

All of these things help to bring us to a place of true interior peace and silence where we can begin to listen to God. If we are just learning to pray, then it might take all of our prayer time just to get to this place of silence. That is ok. With time, this will become easier and easier until eventually we can enter into interior silence without any struggle.

Once we are in this place of peace and silence, we will eventually be able to feel the presence of God and speak directly to God; heart speaking to heart. There are as many ways to pray as there are people in this world, but today I want to focus on a simple method of prayer that we can all use called *lectio divina*. This literally means “divine reading” and is a prayerful way of reading through Sacred Scripture. The first step of this prayer is *lectio* when we slowly and prayerfully read through a small passage of Scripture. When we get to a word that grabs our heart, we stop to reflect on that word. For example, when praying through “my sheep hear my voice,” our hearts might be grabbed by the word “sheep” so we would stop there.

This brings us to the second step which is *meditatio*. Here, we slowly meditate on the word that grabbed our heart, chewing on it like a cow chews on cud. We can repeat the word slowly to ourselves, allowing our mind to draw us deeper into its mystery and meaning. We might, for example, be led to reflect on the fact that that we are like sheep who have been led astray, needing a shepherd to guide us.

This brings us to the third step of *lectio* which is *oratio*, meaning prayer. Our meditation should lead us to a place of prayer where we begin to pour out our hearts to God. In our passage from today, our meditation about our need for a shepherd can lead us to beg God to be our Shepherd and reveal His will so that we might follow Him more fully in our lives.

Eventually, this should lead us into the fourth and final stage of *lectio* which is *contemplatio*, contemplation. Here, our prayer gives way to deep silence, to a place of contemplation where God is able to speak directly to our hearts. In this stage, God takes over in such a powerful way that awareness of everything else fades away, and all that is before our sight is God. Whenever we eventually lose our concentration or fall out of prayer, we simply return to a prayerful reading of our passage until another word grabs our heart. Then we stop and repeat the process again.

*Lectio Divina* is just one of the many ways that we can learn to dig deeper into the Word of God. It allows us to adjust the dial until we can discover that God truly is speaking to us through the Scriptures in a way that we can hear. Through this spiritual discipline, we can more readily discover the truth of Jesus' words that we truly are His sheep who hear His voice.