

Easter 4 C
St. John 10:22-30
April 17, 2016
St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris

Voices

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.

I am reminded of the old "Prince Spaghetti" commercial from a few years back, where you heard a woman—a mother—excitedly exhorting her son to come home for supper, her voice echoing all over the neighborhood..."Anthony, Anthony"...Wednesday evening is spaghetti night in Italian homes, and the little boy comes tearing home for his favorite meal, at least that's the implication of the commercial. I would have to agree: as a young man, my favorite meal was spaghetti and my mom prepared it regularly and on special occasions like my birthday. But my point here is that the young lad knew his mother's voice and honed in on it like a beacon to guide him home. To me, this is like sheep listening to a voice, a voice they know very well.

During childhood, when you heard your father or mother's voice calling you out the door or window of your house, several homes away, you lifted your head, responded and headed home. Perhaps they wanted you to come home for dinner. Maybe something else was important going on in your family. Maybe they had somewhere to take you. But you heard their voice, and hopefully you listened and followed them. At their calling, we first learned of the voice of a shepherd in our own lives, as we were like little sheep ourselves, under the protection of our parents. Parents are more

often than not good shepherds to their little flock. Very few do not have their best interests at heart, so we would be careful to follow where their voices led us, as it was for our own good and safety that they summoned us back to the fold. Should we get lost, they would search for us, Good Shepherds that they are.

We hear many voices in our lives. Sometimes it is like a noisy cacophony, completely confusing, and very hard for us to discern which voices are important to listen to in our lives. I think that begins with the importance of the message. Let me call to mind a few of those voices:

- While some voices are about getting us to consume our time and money on some elusive temporal goal that is supposed to satisfy our pleasure, I hardly think many of these are important, at least not something *your life depends upon important*, so you can rule these out.
- Some voices are harshly and sometimes unfairly and insensitively critical of us. We hear these messages all too well and internalize them, allowing them to eat away at what little self esteem we may have. These are also voices we should discount and ignore, yet we find it difficult to do so.
- There are voices beyond our control which sometimes invade the minds of those with a disease of the brain known as Schizophrenia. It is difficult to imagine the weight of hearing critical voices demeaning you and confusing you, which sound so real, and yet somewhere inside you, you know they are illusory. It is even more plaguing to imagine the same voices inside your mind commanding you to harm yourself or others. God heals by giving the strength to resist these voices and their diabolical messages. These are likely the voices which Jesus cast out of their victims as he went about in his healing ministry while among us.

- Some voices are welcome, familiar voices well known to us and their voices warm our hearts and calm our minds, and these are the voices of loved ones communicating with us from afar, reminding us that we are not alone and that we are not unloved, and that someone cares for us. These are voices to cherish, that speak to our hearts. Yet there is a voice less transitory and always accessible to us, which will never fail us: the still small voice of *God*.
- Some voices invite us to join with others, either because others are simply unsure they have made the right choices and want some company because they are feeling a little bit lonely out on a limb, or simply because misery loves company. Again, these are not voices we ought to be following.
- Then there are the voices which love to spread rumors and stories about others. We are tempted to listen to these juicy tidbits either because they make us feel better about ourselves or because we revel in hearing the supposed misfortunes and failings of others, *there but for the Grace of God go I, thank you*. ...But we ought to say a quick and hardy good bye to such voices as these, because their maliferous and odious tone is toxic to our ears and minds, and they give no one any benefit. The voice of gossip is as far from that of the *Good Shepherd* as you can get.
- Then there is the sound of our own tongues flapping quickly about as our own voice dominates the air in a room. If you find yourself talking for more than a couple of minutes straight, and aren't giving a speech, teaching a class, preaching a sermon, or doing a monologue of jokes at some venue, then you probably should be aware of the hot air that is fast escaping from your oral cavity and the disinterest of the poor souls attendant to you at the time. As James so aptly stated in his Epistle, and whose wisdom speaks to the

fallacy of enjoying the sound of your own voice, "*Be quick to listen and slow to speak...*"

- We sometimes hear an inner voice calling us to follow our passion, whatever that passion may be. That is, if we have discovered our passion. Sometimes we postpone listening to this voice for various reasons, though life seems to present us with several opportunities during its course to pursue it. Sometimes this passionate voice leads us to a cause to follow or a vocation to pursue or a person to be with for the rest of our lives. And we ought to be ready to follow this voice, wherever it will lead us, for in following our passion, there true happiness and fulfillment may be found. The greatest passion to tug at us is the passion for God.
- Then there is the voice of the Good Shepherd. How can we hear this voice, if we don't listen? How often have we heard it described as the "still small voice of God?" This is the voice of which Eli'jah spoke in I Kings 19: "*And [the Word of the Lord which came to Eli'jah] said, "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD." And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And when Eli'jah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.*" You know it when you hear it, despite the distractions of life, even the forces of nature, a still small voice which resonates so deeply in your soul that you cannot ignore it, and dare you disregard it, you do so at your peril.
- The voice of the Good shepherd is described in the Gospel in this way: "*I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and*

my sheep know me— just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd... My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." It is a voice we will know when we hear it. It speaks to our hearts deeply. It speaks to all corners of our minds. The voice of God brings peace and clarity and harmony. The voice of God expresses love, and much more than that, it is pure love. The voice of God lifts us and supports us and sustains us. The voice of God leads us not where, but how we ought to be.

My sheep listen to my voice... We are God's sheep. We should trust and follow where that voice leads

The voice of the Good Shepherd, the voice of one speaking in the wilderness of humankind: "*I and the Father are one*" What a radical statement to the ears that first heard these words! To some ears, this was the ultimate blasphemy. Imagine the hubris of someone claiming to be God! Who would dare do such a thing? Emperors and Pharaohs have reached this conclusion about themselves, but we know that they died and were buried. Their immortality is in the history books. Even so, do we grasp the meaning of these words, spoken by God as God walked the earth among us?

Jesus is not the adopted Son of God. It is imprecise to say that he is like a child or son to God. It is inappropriate to think of Jesus as different or apart from God. **Jesus is God:** God walking among us on this earth in this very specific individual, Jesus of Nazareth. And this Jesus is revealed to us as a Good Shepherd, one who cares about us and cares for us and loves us. God is a Good Shepherd that will not allow one sheep to be lost. God's voice will always find you, no matter where you travel, how far you

go, how lost you feel you have become. Stop and listen: hear the voice of God calling you by name. AMEN