

His Voice & our vocation

4th Sunday of Easter – Cycle C – 12 May 2019 – Vocation Sunday & Mothers' Day
Readings: Acts 13:14,43-52; Rev 7:9,14b-17; Jn 10:27-30

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (Jn)

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. Shepherd, sheep, lamb and flock appear prominently in today's three readings. Being '*World Day of Prayer for Vocations*' as well as '*Mothers' Day*' our focus could be on the '*voice of the Good Shepherd*' and the Christian commitment (*vocation*) to follow Christ by being '*motherly shepherds*', so to say, who are caring and compassionate towards the flock. The Bible contains some 400 references to sheep and another 100 to shepherd. This prominence grows out of two phenomena: (a) the importance of sheep to the agricultural life of the Israelites, and (b) the qualities of sheep and shepherds, which made them very apt sources of metaphor for spiritual realities. Abraham, Isaac, Moses, David and Amos were shepherds (Gen 12:16; 26:14; Ex 3:1; 2 Sam 7:8; Amos 1:1) and Rachel (Gen 29:9) and the daughters of Jethro (Ex 2:16) were shepherdesses. Shepherds are providers, protectors and caring guides of sheep. Consequently, sheep are instinctively sensitive to shepherds' voices and follow them knowing that they are safe. Lambs were also often victims in sacrifices. Hence, Biblical imagery develops themes of: (a) leaders as shepherds, (b) the chosen people as God's sheep, (c) God as shepherd, and, (d) the Messiah as shepherd-and-lamb.
2. One might assume that today's gospel passage belongs to John's 'good shepherd discourse'. This is incorrect since the good shepherd discourse (Jn 10:1-18) deals with the shepherd and sheep-gate, whereas today's passage (vv. 27-30) specifically deals with the *sheep*. Sheep know shepherds and follow them by instinct rather than by the use of any intellect, discernment and free will. By contrast, Jesus says: "My sheep—namely, you and I—*hear* my voice, and I *know* them, and they *follow* me." The three essentials in this 2-way relationship are: [i] listening; [ii] knowing; [iii] following. Our 'vocation'—from the Latin '*vocare*'—is precisely hearkening to His call conscientiously as the outcome of careful, daily listening. Careful and constant listening leads to a deepened knowledge of Jesus, which, ultimately, overflows into following in His footsteps. Unlike 'sheepish listening' our vocation demands a discerning mind and heart, as well as the hands and feet for a total, joyful and generous response to His voice. This could lead to difficulties, dangers and even death as bold martyrs have shown us down through the Christian centuries. We see some of this in the first reading.
3. The first reading describes the 'first missionary journey' of Paul and Barnabas. The pattern of events is typical of the missionary journeys: the apostles preach in synagogues; a certain number of Jews and Gentile converts to Judaism believe, while others reject the message and incite opposition against the apostles, who then turn to the Gentiles. The proclamation of God's word has no promise of

success, but the pastor must proclaim it whether it is accepted or rejected. Interestingly, although the shepherd-disciples face jealousy, criticisms and severe persecutions, we are told that as fruit of their proclamation of the word, “the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.”

Linking the Second Reading with the Theme: The second reading from Apocalypse is normally associated with All Saints Day. Many martyrs who have “been through the great persecution” and have been “washed in the blood of the Lamb” (Jesus) now enjoy their heavenly reward. Symbolically, “The Lamb who is at the throne will be their shepherd and will lead them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” Here, Jesus is both, shepherd-and-lamb. The theme of experiencing deep and lasting joy after going through trials and tribulations once again appears here.

The Psalm (100): The dual theme of sheep/flock as well as joy resounds in the psalm with the response: “We are his people, the sheep of his flock” and the opening verse: “Cry out with joy to the Lord, all the earth!” Easter is a feast of joy. Those who listen to Jesus’ voice and follow Him in their vocation will concretely experience this joy.

Three Contextual Concerns:

The ‘Mother’ Concern: Christianity and the Church are sometimes accused of mainly showing the world a masculine, fatherly face. However, the Church is ‘Mother’ with a special devotion to Mother Mary. Today, let’s acknowledge the role of mothers in the Church—who selflessly provide families with spiritual food.

The Vocational Concern: Vocations to the priesthood and religious life are dwindling not only because of demographic or materialist reasons but also because we, as pastors, neither listen attentively to The Shepherd nor faithfully serve the sheep. Perhaps we need to promote vocations more by our example than by our words?

The Ecumenical Concern: Jesus says, “My Father, who has given them [sheep] to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” Today, there are so many sheepfolds [denominations] with sheep stealing and competition among churches. Let us pray for church unity.

Pope Francis’s message for ‘World Day of Prayer for Vocations’ 2019: “There can be no greater joy than to risk one’s life for the Lord! I would like to say this especially to you, the young. Do not be deaf to the Lord’s call. If he calls you to follow this path, do not pull your oars into the boat, but trust him. Do not yield to fear, which paralyzes us before the great heights to which the Lord points us. Always remember that to those who leave their nets and boat behind, and follow him, the Lord promises the joy of a new life that can fill our hearts and enliven our journey.”

In Lighter Vein: A pastor demanded for donations so shamelessly that his parishioners insisted that he refer to them not as flock but as ‘fleeced’. In Germany, Christians pay a percentage of their annual income for the upkeep of clergymen and the Church; hence, people jokingly call pastors ‘German shepherds’.
