

## My Sheep Hear My Voice

Easter 4C April 25, 2010

Today we will be thinking about sheep. What happened to the clock that fell into the sheepdip? It lost all of its ticks.....What would you get if you crossed a goat and a sheep? An animal that eats tin cans and gives back steel wool.

Today's Gospel lesson is, at least in part, about recognizing the voice of the Sacred when we hear it. A group of people have gathered around Jesus and they want him to tell them whether or not he is the expected Messiah; "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus replied (and I am paraphrasing), "I have told you, but you cannot hear what I have said because you're not ready. Something is getting in the way, interfering with the signal. You are not hearing the Sacred Voice within your own hearts."

Linda Douty tells the following story: "A few years ago, Catherine, an affluent 67-year-old widow of a local physician, came to me for counseling. She complained that something was not quite right with her life, but she had not been able to determine what was wrong. During our conversation, Catherine spoke of her involvement in those activities we associate with retirement--travel, club functions, volunteer activities, church work, close friendships, control over her own time, and grandchildren who actually sought her company. In addition, she enjoyed excellent health. As she spoke of her travels around the world and her adventures as an importer of antiques, I thought to myself, not a little enviously, 'What a lovely life this woman has. If she's not happy with all this, she must be clinically depressed.' In a tone close to desperation she said, 'I'm playing 'antique bingo' in the same way that other people play real bingo: just to kill time amusing myself.' She claimed that despite the fullness of her life, she was missing something. 'You know, I've kept very busy all of my life: I've always had something to do, somewhere to go, somebody to be with. But now I don't want to do any of that; I don't SAVOR anything! Lately I've begun to withdraw from so many activities, and my friends and family are becoming worried about me. To be honest, my daughter is the one who sent me to you.

"I don't really think I'm depressed....it's just that underneath it all I have a feeling that there's more to life than what I have experienced. I just can't seem to get in touch with what this something more is.' I asked her about her spiritual life. 'I go to church every Sunday morning and Wednesday evening - have for years. I have taught Sunday school for the past 26 years, and have been president of one church committee or another for my entire adult life. But sometimes church isn't speaking to the way I'm feeling right now. It's just another activity.' 'That's your CHURCH life,' I said. 'What is going on between you and God?' There was a long pause. 'Nothing', she replied "and to be perfectly honest, there are times in the middle of the night when I wonder if there really is a God who is concerned with the minutiae of human life. I want to experience God, but most days it seems as though I've been behaving well and working for someone I've read and heard about, but have never actually met.'

How many of us, if we were to be honest, would same the same thing as Catherine? How often have you attempted to call upon God, to engage God in conversation only to feel like no one was listening, like you were talking to yourself? How can we long to hear God's voice and yet never seem to hear it? Let's examine two questions: what does the Sacred sound like and what's preventing us from hearing Him?

What does the voice of the Sacred sound like? It may not be at all what you expect. I suppose it is natural to assume that the voice of the most powerful being in the universe would also be overwhelming and loud. But the truth is, most of the time, the voice of the Sacred sounds like a whisper, like a gentle breeze rustling the leaves of your heart on an autumn day. Listen to this passage from I Kings: *God said to the Prophet Elijah: "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces 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 sound of sheer silence—and then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here Elijah?"* While we may expect the sound of God's voice to be experienced as ear-splitting thunder or the ground shifting violently under our feet, the experience of Sacred Voice is much more likely to be that of a soft feather stroking the nape of our soul.

What interferes with our hearing and recognizing the voice of God? Noise, the noise of our minds & hearts, the noise of our expectations & demands, the noise of our fears and worries, the noise of our own egos demanding to be in charge and in control. Thomas Merton said, 'Silence is the first language of God; all else is a poor translation.' Catherine's good intentions, her constant business and frenetic striving, her activity in the church, her persistent efforts all colluded to create a cacophony of interior noise and distraction. Rather than taking time to be still, quiet and reflective, she filled her life with noise and, thereby, was unable to hear the voice of her Beloved, the sound of the Lover of her soul. And sadness, emptiness and meaninglessness had become her companions on the journey.

The good news for Catherine is she eventually became conscious of her need to make the crucial transition from leading a good, exceedingly busy, unreflective Christian life to a good, less busy, somewhat quieter, more reflective, more prayerful Christian life. In other words, she moved from running into listening: from always focusing on the externals of life to spending time with her own heart. She began to take enough time to listen to her own heart and discovered it saying, 'I want to know you, dear God; and however you want to speak to me, I sit here in your presence today with all the doors of my heart open. You're as close as my breath - just help me to know it, to listen to it, and to hear.' This is precisely the step those surrounding Jesus had not taken. Remaining fixed upon trying to control and be in control, their ears were stopped up. The Sacred was present in and through and all around them and they could not hear or see.

All of us can recognize the Sacred Voice if we quiet ourselves and open our hearts. All of us recognize the voice of peace, love, joy, and wisdom. And this is what it means to be a member of Jesus' flock; one of his sheep who hear and recognize his voice. Dear God, give us the wisdom to seek and wait for you in the temple of a quiet, open heart. AMEN.