

## INI

John 10,11-16 & 27-30

Easter 2 — Misericordias Domini — 19 April 2015

**Greeting:** To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ: mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you all. Amen.

We hear a portion of the Holy Gospel According to Saint John, which was read earlier:

Listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd, Jesus: “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they know Me; <sup>28</sup> and I give eternal life to them; and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of My hand.”

**So far the text. Let us pray:** Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, our strength and our Redeemer.

**Introduction.** Today we are bombarded by many voices urging us to trust in the voice we are hearing. It’s an understatement to say that it is often difficult to tell whom we should trust. It doesn’t matter whether it is in politics, economics, health, the environment, or even in religion. Which one should we listen to? Which one should we follow? How do we make the right decision?

To which voice should listen? Which voice should we follow? These are not new questions. People have always had to wrestle which these questions.

In all of history, there has only been one voice to which people should listen, in which they can trust, and which they should follow. This voice is the voice of the Good Shepherd, our Lord, Jesus Christ.

According to the Church Year, this Sunday is also known as Good

Shepherd Sunday. It is no secret Who the Good Shepherd is, because the Good Shepherd says that “He lays down His life for the sheep.” This brings me to today’s sermon topic: “**The Voice Of The Good Shepherd Gathers.**” How does He gather? He gathers when:

- 1) He Speaks And We Hear;**
- 2) He Speaks And We Follow;** and,
- 3) He Dies So We Will Live**

**1) Jesus Speaks And We Hear.** Today, many people speak about what constitutes an authentic “voice.” People who speak like this are speaking about whether people who are not members of a particular ethnic, racial, religious, — you name it — group can speak for that group.

For example, Margaret Jones wrote under the pseudonym of Margaret Seltzer, who supposedly was part white and part native American and a member of the Bloods gang in Los Angeles. In fact she grew up in Sherman Oakes and attended an elite Episcopalian high school; she made it all up. Or Monique de Wael, who wrote under the pseudonym of Mischa Defonseca, who was supposedly a survivor of Auschwitz and lived with a pack of wolves; in fact, she was a Christian, grew up in Holland, and had nothing to do with being a Holocaust survivor, much less living with wolves.

Several years ago there was a debate among authors about who could speak in an “authentic voice.” J. P. Kinsella, who also had written the book on which the movie “Field of Dreams” was based, wrote comic novels about Indians on the Hobbema reserve south of Edmonton. Kinsella was criticized by Rudy Wiebe, who was also an author and teaches at the University of Alberta. Wiebe said that Kinsella shouldn’t write about Indians because Kinsella was white. The funny part about all this is that Kinsella’s books were best sellers while Wiebe’s didn’t sell as well. Also, Indians loved Kinsella’s writings.

To speak about an authentic voice, however, also touches on our topic for today. The Good Shepherd says, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.”

In Palestine, the majority of sheep are raised for wool and not for slaughter. In this setting, it is quite natural that a shepherd will know all the sheep in a flock, from the young to the old.

A shepherd will also give names to his sheep. In farming, it's generally not a good idea to give names to animals you're going to slaughter and eat.

From a nineteenth century travel journal of an Englishman going to Palestine we have the following description of being caught in a cave during a rain storm with two shepherds and their respective flocks. After the storm passed, the traveler wondered how the shepherds would separate their respective flocks, which were thoroughly mixed, one with the other. One shepherd went a little ways from the cave and began to call his sheep by name. The sheep knew his voice and followed him; in a few minutes all the sheep were properly separated.

Jesus says that really there is no difference with us. He is our Good Shepherd and as His sheep we hear His voice.

Perhaps we first heard the Good Shepherd's voice at a time when we really cannot remember, for example, at our Baptism. Then as we grew, we heard it at home, in church, whenever we read God's Word.

But Jesus also speaks about the voice of the hireling, the paid shepherd, the one whose voice the sheep do not recognize. What happens when the hireling speaks to the sheep? They flee — and perhaps they keep running until they are out of range of both the voice of the hireling and the voice of the Good Shepherd. But when they have run so that they cannot hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, then life becomes difficult for the sheep.

Now for the question: Who is the hireling? The answer lies within the context of John's Gospel.

In the ninth chapter of John, we read of a man born blind. This disciples asked Jesus who was to blame that the man was blind from birth — his parents or himself? (John 9,2) Jesus answered: "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents, but it was in order that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9,3).

The disciples shared the popular idea that when someone is born with a disability, then this was the manifestation of some sort of open or hidden sin. They thought that each disability was a tit-for-tat punishment from God. Sometimes there are causal connections, for example the unsuspecting who took Thalidomide or the drug addict who gives birth to an addicted baby. But most of the time there is no connection between behavior of the parents and a birth defect. Unfortunately today all too many people look for some sort of connection between a birth defect and sin. For the most part this is futile and irrelevant.

Jesus mixed earth and spittle and put the mixture on the eyes of the blind man. But because Jesus did this on the Sabbath, the Pharisees condemned Jesus for breaking the Law that said one shouldn't work on the Sabbath — and mixing earth and spittle, much less healing, was considered to be work. The Pharisees were of a mixed opinion of how one could break God's Law but still be able to heal a blind man.

The Pharisees were outwardly very pious and strictly observed God's Law. But they often applied the Law in an inhumane and legalistic manner.

For example, quite apart from Scripture, they drew up a list of occupations that automatically called people "sinners." Thus, tax collectors were sinners. Shepherds also were on that list as well. Why? Because they had to be with the sheep and couldn't fulfill all the

requirements of the Law. Some of the rabbis did wonder how David in the Twenty-third Psalm could call the Lord “my Shepherd” and place his trust in a Shepherd.

In both examples, from the disciples and the Pharisees, we see examples of people who would confuse and scatter God’s sheep. They were pushing the sheep away from the great Shepherd of the sheep, Jesus Himself, who took on flesh and dwelt among us.

Where is the hireling to be found? The hireling is not to be found in another religion or even what comprises New Age psychobabble or a cult. Rather, Jesus is speaking about people within God’s Church family, people who would presume to speak God’s Word.

Here is the warning for us. When I think about a hireling, I should not be looking around me and pointing a finger. I should be looking in the mirror. To be sure, the Latin word for “shepherd” is “pastor.” But beyond that, I look at my station in life: as a husband, a father, a brother-in-law, a father-in-law (I can’t say son, since both of my parents are dead), a neighbor, and so forth. I must ask myself: “Am I speaking the words of Jesus which gather, or am I speaking the words of a hireling and scatter?”

That is the question which confronts each of us. It is only as we place ourselves under God’s judgment that we are equipped to gather rather than scatter. This goes to the heart of why we listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd.

**2) Jesus Speaks And We Follow.** For us sheep, Jesus’ voice is an authentic voice, because Jesus does not speak about where He has not gone.

In an era before sheep dogs, in Palestine a shepherd would lead His flock out of their pen to pasture. But the shepherd was always with them. In the words of the psalmist,

The LORD is my Shepherd;

**I shall not want.**

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

**He leadeth me beside the still waters.**

He restoreth my soul:

**He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.**

The Palestinian shepherd often kept his sheep in a sheep fold or pen, made out of stones. He was the gate; he laid his staff across the gate and as the sheep entered he inspected each one to check it for injuries or sickness. During the day, the shepherd made sure the sheep had pasture and that they were led to still waters so that they could drink.

The shepherd went out into the wild with his sheep, and his rod and staff protected them.

To translate this into a modern idiom, we would say that the shepherd went to work with the sheep. Just as Jesus went to work with the blind man.

What about the hireling? Well, the disciples wanted to pass by the blind man, and then try to judge the blind man. The Pharisees would have kept him blind rather than have Jesus heal. I suppose worse examples can be found. But the point is, that in the face of need, the hireling flees, hides behind excuses, and lets the sheep be prey for unbelief (I haven't figured out who the wolf is: sin, the devil, or death, take your pick).

But the Good Shepherd stands his ground. Ultimately, as David wrote,

Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no evil:

Thus we see that

**3) Jesus Dies So We Will Live.** The Valley of the Shadow of Death is where the Good Shepherd has gone. Jesus laid down His life for the sheep — for you and I and for the world — so that His would be the authentic voice that all people can hear.

The Good Shepherd laid down His life to win for us forgiveness of our sins. That word of forgiveness gives us spiritual sight and spiritual hearing.

That word of forgiveness, with no strings attached, without any work or merit on our part, is what gathers. That's it. Nothing else, and no one else. There is only one voice that gives that forgiveness, and that is the voice of Jesus.

This is what I meant earlier that when I look in the mirror and stand under God's judgement it is only that word of forgiveness that can restore me to have the confidence to keep speaking, to keep forgiving, to keep gathering.

For example: Do I get angry? Sure. Is it always justified? No. Even if my anger were justified, does that matter in God's eyes? No. Is a word spoken in anger a word that scatters or gathers?

When God speaks, we may speak. There are times to defend God's word, to use it as Paul said, for correction, for instruction, for reproof. But Paul also said, "Speak the truth in love." Speak it with certainty, but first always judging ourselves, and then speaking with the forgiveness that Christ has won for us.

But when God is silent, then we are to be silent. Back in the late 60s and early 70s, for example, hair styles changed; they changed radically. Young men started to let their hair grow — as a matter of note, I've basically had more or less the same haircut for my entire life.

No it's a bit shorter because it's thinning and grayer — but there were people in the Church who took exception to the long hair of their sons. Angry words were spoken; Bible verses were quoted out of context. Angry words. Were those words that scattered? You bet. Is there forgiveness? Yes, of course. Can we grow in our faith, in our walk with Jesus; God-willing, yes.

**Conclusion.** Who speaks for us before God? Only Jesus. Only the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for us sheep. He laid it down and then raised it up so that we might always hear His voice.

And because we hear His voice, He has given us voices to speak as well. He has forgiven us so that through us, as we speak the words of forgiveness, we too might be under-shepherds of Jesus who gather. That we might be forgiven to always live close to His words, so that we might speak with authority and love.

Thus we conclude with the words of David,

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:  
**and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever. Amen.**

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. **Amen.**

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