

Personal Guidance Fourth Sunday of Easter/C April 17, 2016 10:45 AM
Acts 13:14, 43-52; Rev 7:9, 14b-17; **Jn 10:27-30** (The Good Shepherd knows his
sheep. He can tailor-make the guidance and direction we need for life.)

“Jesus said, ‘My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me.’”

Now this gospel proclamation that Ken has shared with us sounds very bucolic and indeed pastoral, but it’s actually taken out of a long discourse that is heated and actually harsh, where Jesus is suggesting some rather novel aspects of his ministry and mission, which his opponents are not accepting; and we have to admit they are novel. But should we be hostile to them or indifferent, or should we really take a closer look? The second claim here is that **there is a personal relationship and communication between Jesus and his followers.** Had anyone ever claimed that before? Many people then and now agree vaguely with Jesus’ teachings and values. They think very well of him, but they want to keep their distance. People feel that getting intimate with God might just swallow them up.

But the point Jesus makes is that he wants to shepherd his followers, and his followers are indeed supposed to listen to him and his guidance. And this guidance is personal and direct. It’s not something abstract. It’s not theoretical. He is not talking about philosophy. He is talking about a kind of guidance **that people often call conscience.** The problem is that if we look around and we are honest, we can see conscience is a very fragile and fallible thing. It’s not as if we are simply born with some inner wisdom. Some people may think that; we can all tell that’s wrong by our observations. It is true human beings are born with the power, that is, the potential, to discern good from bad, right from wrong; but how well developed an instrument is this? We see that **some people do not have a conscience.** This is from modern psychology. Some people never are sorry. They never feel responsible for anything. They never feel remorse; they don’t have that emotional capacity. They are called **sociopaths.** There’s a book called *The Sociopath Next Door* that claims that 4% of the general population is like this. In discussing it with my brothers and sister, they tell me it’s much more than 4%.

Then there are those who do start out with a conscience, but they harden it by doing evil. For example, I remember an interview with a Mafia hit man, and the interviewer said, “Well, doesn’t it bother you killing people in cold blood? And his answer was, “At first it did.” At first it did, so **conscience can be killed.** It can be dulled. It can be covered over.

On the other side of the spectrum we have neurotics. **Neurotics are people who feel guilt and shame all the time just for minor imperfections.** They just feel they are bad or wrong or not good enough. But that’s also a flaw in conscience because that’s not true. So these are three ways in which **conscience can be seen as unreliable: either it isn’t there at all or it’s been dulled or deadened, or it’s hypersensitive.** All these lead to a lack of reliability. And we can see the results of that in our society. Even educated people today honestly question whether all kinds of homicide are really wrong. As you know, some people think killing the unborn is okay. Some people think killing the incurably ill is okay. Some people think assisting others to commit suicide is okay. And in fact, today no moral principles are without challenges. **There is little consensus in our modern Western society about what is right and what is wrong, and this is worrisome.**

Therefore the teaching that **there is an indwelling spirit of truth that shepherds our lives and helps us discern the path we need to take** is definitely relevant and newsworthy, and we should wake up and pay attention to it. There may have been a time in the not so distant past when people could more or less follow the general moral trends of society and pretty well not stray too much, but that period is over. If we want to seek the good and do the good, **we need the personal guidance of God; and this is exactly what this gospel is about.**

Now the voice of the shepherd is not like my voice. It doesn't impinge on our eardrums, but it impinges on our hearts. We have to learn how to listen. It's very soft and can be drowned out by all the ambient noise that is everywhere in our society, inside of us and outside of us. So **listening to this immanent presence of Christ requires a certain amount of quiet, a certain amount of freedom from intrusions and distractions.** But modern society is just full of intrusions and distractions, as you know. The knowledge of God is not like the knowledge we gain from books or school or research. It isn't factual in nature; it's personal, like the knowledge you have of your mother or your father or members of your family. You know your children in a way you actually can't verbalize. You know your parents in a way you can't verbalize, but that isn't a hundred percent correct. There are things about your children you don't know. There are things about your parents you don't know. So this kind of personal knowledge is true, but incomplete. It's valid, but there is something tentative about it; that means we have to keep learning all the time. We don't get to the point where, well, now you have your degree, and you don't have to study any more. No, that never happens **in our personal walk with God. We are going from one learning experience to another one.**

And there are people, there are faithful people, there are religious people who hate this. They want certainty. They want to know in black-and-white terms what they should do or what is really right or what is really wrong or what is really good or what isn't, but that isn't the way God shepherds. **We have the example of the saints. Their lives are always full of confusion and doubt. Should yours be easier? Should ours be different?** This is why St. Paul said, "We walk by faith, not by sight." He meant that **we have to learn to trust in what we don't really understand and of what we are not really certain.** And we have to walk humbly. This kind of trust does not make us right; **it leads us humbly.**

The Good Shepherd knows his sheep. We are not all the same. We all don't need the same advice. We don't all have to work on the same issues. The Good Shepherd knows that. **He can tailor-make the guidance and direction we need for life.** And he lets his sheep know him; he lets us know him. And he teaches all the qualities and virtues that Jesus himself modeled. That's why he said, "I am the Good Shepherd." He is the model. **If we want a guide, a general guide to where the Good Shepherd is going to lead us, just look at the life of Jesus himself.** He came to show us what it means to live a life worthy of God, our Father.