

LISTENING TO THE SHEPHERD

Easter 4 Year C

Acts 9:36-43; Ps. 23; Rev. 7:9-17; Jn. 10:22-30

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Who has ever put their sunglasses or regular glasses on their head and then wandered around the house looking for them. Or spent three days looking for something that you just *know* is in the house and then someone walks in and finds it straight away. It's not only frustrating—you feel like an absolute fool.

Sometimes people look for other sorts of things—answers to questions that have plagued you for many years—a solution to a particular problem that seems to be just out of your reach. All of you know just how frustrating it can be when we cannot find the answer to a particular problem that you might be facing.

I remember some time ago, I bought a cordless phone—juts about the time they started to become popular. They are truly a marvellous invention. You know the ones—they have a base station that is plugged into the electricity and the phone line—but have a handset that you can take and operate from anywhere in the house. Marvellous invention. I bought it because we didn't have a phone outlet in the main bedroom. It also comes in handy when there are teenagers around.

One day, something happened to it and it wouldn't work. I couldn't send or receive any calls from it. Everything else seemed to be working—the battery seemed to be charging, the pager worked—but when I tried to make a call—nothing—not a sausage—not a dial tone or anything. After trying everything I knew and then after a considerable period of time of scratching my head (and I can ill afford to do too much of that) I did what any amateur technician would do, I decided to consult the manual. After some minutes of searching I was in triumphant possession of the manual, determined to find the cause of my frustration.

The manual was very informative. It even had a section on troubleshooting. I read it carefully, taking note of all the possible problems I could be experiencing and all the solutions it provided. I tried a few things it suggested—checked the power cord again—re-aligned the frequency between the base station and the handset—all to no avail. By this time, I was really becoming agitated. Nothing worked. Had I purchased a lemon?—the story of my life.

Well after a couple of days of getting nowhere, I decided to tackle the problem again—I was not going to let it beat me. After reading the manual for about the third or fourth time, I suddenly had an idea, and going into the kitchen, I looked for the phone plug—and yes, you guessed it—the phone line was not plugged into the phone socket in the wall. How stupid do you think I felt? (Don't answer that.) My only consolation was that no-one else in the family had thought of it either.

Then I got to thinking. I had read that manual over and over again and every time I read it, I read the words: "Make sure that the phone line is plugged in." There it was in black

and white—but I hadn't seen it. My frustration was purely the result of my not checking the obvious and not seeing what was plainly in front of my eyes.

How often do we become anxious or impatient, simply because we do not see what is right in front of our eyes or hear that which is plainly spoken? We become frustrated and impatience and temperatures rise. Sometimes we look for answers in the wrong places. Sometimes the answers are right in front of us—and as we journey through life we look for evidence of truth, yet we often don't see it, even when it is right in front of us.

Some 2,000 years ago, both the disciples of Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders faced a particularly perplexing question regarding Jesus Christ. And the question they were asking was this: Is he—or is he not—the Messiah—the long awaited Shepherd of the people—the fulfilment of all those old and revered prophetic utterances—the One who would free them from the tyranny of Roman occupation.

In today's reading from the Gospel according to John, Jesus is in Jerusalem for Hanukkah—the Feast of Dedication—a feast devoted to Jewish liberation. It is winter, the rainy season in Israel, and Jesus is speaking with the rabbis and their students under the protection of that part of the Temple called Solomon's Porch. Surrounding Jesus they ask the real question that is on their mind: "Are you the Messiah." Now, Jesus answers their question, but his answer probably only served to confuse them even more than they were already, and possibly engendered a certain amount of anger and frustration.

The question put to Jesus, is normally translated as, "How long will you keep us in suspense?" In other words, "If you are the Messiah, why don't you claim your kingdom now—why don't you fulfil the prophetic voice of our ancestors and liberate us from the burden of our oppression?"

But the question could also be a reflection of what was going on in the mind of the religious leaders, for it could also be read as, "How long will you continue to annoy us?" For both the disciples and the Pharisees, the idea behind the question could be something like this: "If you are going to claim your kingdom as the Messiah, then now would be a good time. Now would be an excellent time to show your hand. Do something that will cause us to believe in you or go away and leave us alone—one or the other, just don't keep us all hanging in suspense."

Jesus responds to their question, but not in the way they expected—something he was pretty good at.

Now, don't you just hate it when a person won't give you a straight answer to a simple question? "How long will it take you to clean your room?" (Simple straightforward question, right?) "Well, I've got to sort out my things and decide what I want to keep and what I want to throw out." "But how long will it take you?" "Well, I have to pack up all my books and put away all my clean clothes." "Yes, I know all that—but how long will it take you?" "Um, I don't know." Any other parent of a teenager had that conversation or am I unique? Frustrating, isn't it?

Well, the Jews didn't like it either. His response was: "I have told you and you do not believe." Jesus is not saying that he has literally already told them he is the Messiah—in so many words—but rather that all his teachings and his actions already provide for them the answers they need. All of Jesus' activity, in his life and ministry, reveals the truth of who he is.

Earlier, Jesus had spoken of himself as a shepherd who would lay down his life for his sheep. Now he comes back to that shepherd imagery by declaring, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me." In other words, "The answer to your question is right before your eyes. You have seen the work that I have done. You have heard my teaching. My life has been an open book—and still, you have not been able to see the truth that is right in front of your eyes." The same is true for us—if you want to know the truth, you have to be able to see the work of God and hear the voice of God in the life and work of Jesus.

Usually, when we misunderstand someone, we blame the speaker for not being clear. But when it comes to our relationship with God, the problem for our hearing, is not in the voice of the shepherd—the One who reveals God to us—it is in the ears of the sheep.

We all want Jesus to be our Shepherd. As the Shepherd, Jesus promises to protect us, to bless us, to seek us out when we go astray, to comfort us when we hurt, to heal us when we are ill, to walk with us when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, to bring us into paradise when we die. We all want that, but the question remains: Are we his sheep? Are we actually following the Shepherd? Let's hear again what the Shepherd says about his sheep—what every observer of shepherds and sheep knows to be true:

My sheep know my voice and they follow me. They will not follow a stranger—but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers. I am the good shepherd—I know my own and my own know me. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.

The question that we need to ask ourselves is not, 'Is Jesus our Shepherd', but 'Are we his sheep?' Do we hear the Shepherd's voice—do we listen to his voice and follow him—do we even know what the Shepherd's voice sounds like? Whose voice are you following—the voice of the Shepherd or the voice of a stranger?

This is a test—a test of whether or not we are the sheep of the Good Shepherd—a test of whether or not we are the people who belong to Jesus Christ—the people who belong to God. Only then can we know the truth of who Jesus is. Do you pass the test? Do you know and listen to your Shepherd's voice? Jesus says to the religious leaders:

The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me.

The great test of listening is in the responding. I may believe that Jesus is the Lamb of God—slain for the sins of the world. I may believe that Jesus is the Good Shepherd—the One who laid down his life for me. And, of course, I want Jesus to watch over me—to

protect me—to prepare for me a table in the presence of my enemies. I may even listen to his voice from time to time—but does that make me one of his sheep?

No—it doesn't—it doesn't until I actually respond to that voice—until I actually attempt to do what his voice is calling me to do—until I actually willingly follow the one who is speaking.

And how do we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd? Well, here are three ways in which you might hear the voice of the Shepherd, and I'm quite sure there are others:

1. Regularly read the Scriptures. Study them (join a home group if you can)—meditate on them—allow the words to move from the page and into your mind and heart. Allow them to change your thinking—and your actions.
2. Pray, but don't just rattle off your shopping list—your wants or desires. Pray for yourself, pray for others and as you pray, allow God to speak to you—to open you up to his world—the world of healing and restoration—the world of comfort and hope—the world of endless possibilities.
3. Attend worship regularly. Observe and listen to what goes on during the services. Allow yourself to be touched and challenged by what you see and hear. As you hear the Word of God—as you hear the pronouncement of forgiveness—as you celebrate the sacraments—as you experience the wholeness of the liturgy—allow yourself to be changed and renewed.

In the eyes of God each one of us belongs to his flock. God is calling out to you. God is searching for you. God is asking you to come to Him, to listen to Him, to enter his fold and be sheltered and made safe with the rest of sheep—safe from the robbers and thieves who only want to kill and destroy—safe from the evil one who would have you live in darkness and despair all your days.

As parents call their children to themselves so that they might hold them and bless them—so that they might instruct them and nourish them and show them love—so God is calling you.

Listen and follow—and you shall not want.

Listen and follow—and you will lie down in green pastures.

Listen and follow—and your soul will be restored.

To God be all the glory, honour and praise. Amen.

LET US PRAY

Dear Lord God, thank you for seeking us out—as a shepherd seeks for his sheep. Thank you for keeping us safe—for standing with us in adversity—and for blessing us with all that we have. Help us to listen more to you than we do right now—and give us the faith to follow you more perfectly. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.