

4th Sunday of Easter 2013

Jesus said: "My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. No one can take them out of my hand."

"My sheep hear my voice". If Jesus is truly risen from the dead, if this is not just a pious story, and if Jesus is still speaking to us, shepherding us, through His Word and through His Sacraments, and if we- you and I- are still being called to hear *His* voice- in other words, if these words from the gospel are *true*- then something has to shift big-time for Catholic community. If these words from the gospel are true, then it is the voice of *Christ* that all of us are called to listen *for*, it is the voice of *Christ* listen *to*. It is the voice of *Christ* to which all of us are called *to be obedient*.

The issue of *obedience* in the Church has often been a huge problem for Catholics. For many, many years the model of the Church that we worked with, both consciously and unconsciously, was a pyramidal model, like a monarchy. In that pyramidal model, obedience, then, was conceived of as something always coming from above, top down, similar to the way in which kings would give orders to nobles and nobles would give orders to soldiers and magistrates, and soldiers and magistrates would give orders to the peasantry at the bottom. There was the teaching church and the learning church. There were clergy and the faithful. There were religious and lay. There were superiors and those who submitted. Everything moved downwards, and the only appropriate response on the part of those below was obedience, to do what they were told, to think how they were told to think, and never, ever to push back. Oh, those were the good old days.

All of that changed quite rapidly for Catholics after the 2nd Vatican Council, and the accent shifted to the radical equality of all the baptized, the fundamental equality of all members of the People of God. A diversity of charisms and vocations and ministries there may be, but none of these distinctions negates the radical equality of all members of the Church. This newer way of thinking, of course, was very much in line with an authentic and very ancient baptismal understanding of the Christian community. The problem that it created, however, concerned the issue of obedience. If there is a real baptismal egalitarianism in the Church, what happens to obedience, to whom is any of us called to be obedient? Or are we all free to do exactly as we please?

A couple of decades ago, a conservative reaction then set in out of fear of chaos and concern that the pastors and teachers within the Church were no longer being listened to. The accent then fell once again on obedience, obedience to the magisterium, to those in the teaching office of the Church. And often today you hear people say that being a *faithful* Catholic means being obedient to the magisterium, and if you are not obedient to the hierarchy, then you are not being faithful. There certainly is something legitimate about this concern, but there is also something really quite skewed about the proposed solution. Once again it seems as if we are being pushed back into a pyramidal, “from above” model of the Church. As Sister Joan Chittister has pointed out, this approach can very easily create a distorted notion of obedience and the tension it then creates between loyalty to the Gospel and loyalty to the system, which does not always represent the voice of God.

So, what’s the solution? The Gospel reading today gives us precisely the direction, I think, that we need to follow. If we are to take seriously the baptismal foundation and

character of the Church and the radical equality that baptism creates- all of us, from pope to lay person, have been made sons and daughters of God through baptism and each of us can stand before the transcendent Mystery and call out “Our Father”- if that is true, then all of us, each and every one of us, also has the responsibility to do what today’s gospel says- *My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me.*

As Christians, our first and primary task in life is to listen for, and listen to, the voice of Jesus the Shepherd in our lives. Our English word “obedience”, in fact, comes from two Latin words that mean just that- “to hear” or “to listen”. And the voice that we are trying to hear is the voice of Christ, the voice of the one who was crucified but who is no longer dead, but who lives forever. Being baptized implies both responsibility and accountability, *because ultimately no one can listen for me or listen instead of me.* Your dignity and my dignity rest in our right and our duty and our ability to stand before the living God in life and to listen, to struggle to hear the voice of the Lamb who, as the book of Revelation says, “is in the center of the throne”, and that Lamb, slain but now risen from the dead, will “shepherd us” and will lead “to springs of life-giving water”, and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

The promise of the Gospel is that Jesus can and will still shepherd his people. Do I always hear his voice correctly and clearly? Certainly not. Sometimes I hear what I want to hear. Sometimes I seem to be getting mixed voices. Sometimes I don’t even want to listen. All that is true, but it does not take away either my right or my responsibility to struggle to hear the voice of Jesus in my life. And that is why *we all* need human shepherds, pastors, other people, to help us to listen well. If *Christ* is our Shepherd whose voice we all are called to hear and to respond to, then all other

shepherds in the Church, whether ordained or lay- can only be *servants* of the Great Shepherd directing us to *His* voice. Complete and full listening and obedience ultimately and finally can be given only to Christ Himself. And this is possible only if we believe that Jesus is alive and is still in the midst of the Church leading and guiding and shepherding.

Pope Francis has spoken and written wonderfully about what this human shepherding looks like when it is authentic. At his Holy Thursday homily at the Chrism Mass he told the pastors of the Church that our task is not to distance ourselves from the people or to become ecclesiastical managers or collectors of antiques or novelties of one kind or another. Our task, he said, is to give ourselves to the people. The shepherd, he said, needs to live with the “smell of the sheep”. “To live with the smell of the sheep”- that’s a wonderful image! Before he became pope, Francis also wrote that the work of us priests is to propose to others the truth revealed by God and then to accompany people on their own journey and response to that truth. Our task is *not* to assume the role of making decisions *for you*. Carrying out pastoral ministry like that, he said, would mean that we become dictators, annihilators of the religious personalities of other people. A true pastor and teacher, he argued, “will let his disciple go and he will walk with him in his/her spiritual life”.

These are wonderful words of Pope Francis, words that I haven’t heard for a long, long time. They are words that value the dignity and the freedom of every person, that value the responsibility of every person to engage in the work of listening to the voice of Jesus, the Great Shepherd of His Church, and that value the place of pastoral ministry in accompanying others as they struggle to hear that voice in their lives.

As Christians we are certainly called to love and to listen to those whom God the Spirit has placed in our lives as *pastoral authorities* and as *servants* guiding us towards Christ, the Great Shepherd, but *they* are not ultimate. It is the voice of Christ the Shepherd Himself that we are called to listen for, and listen to, and then obey.

This, brothers and sisters, is Good News, really Good News, but it also places immense responsibility on *all of us*, on *each and every one* of us here. Jesus' words mean that he wants to shepherd us, and that you and I are *accountable to Him* for how we respond to that. When we stand before the Great Shepherd, - and we will - we will be accountable for our lives, we will be accountable for how well we listened, for how well we heard, and what we then did with all of that. That's what "obedience" is really about. Jesus said: "My sheep hear *my* voice; I know them, and they follow *me*. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. No one can take them out of *my* hand."