

4th Sunday Easter A (John 10:1-10)

Several years ago I was peacefully seated on a grassy knoll in Israel, just contemplating my lovely pastoral surroundings and thinking of Jesus who preached the sermon on the mount in that very place. The tinkling of a bell gently interrupted the silence. I glanced around and I discovered that the bell was hanging from the neck of the lead sheep that was following a shepherd holding his staff. I was enthralled and I felt transported as if in a time machine to the same location two thousand years ago. I became aware that the shepherd and the sheep had this very personal relationship, a relationship of deep trust, and that the sheep recognized the voice of the shepherd, and that they wouldn't be led astray or abandoned.

Today's Gospel speaks to us of this relationship. Jesus, the shepherd, "calls his own sheep by name." "He walks ahead of them, and the sheep follow him, because they recognize his voice. But they won't follow a stranger; they will run away from him, because they don't recognize the voice of strangers."

Jesus is trying to tell us something important here. He tells us that it is vital for us to learn to recognize his voice, to hear him call our name, for he has a special interest and love for each one of us as unique sheep of his flock, each with our individual names. Sometimes learning to hear and to listen is difficult. For us the prayer of listening is essential. Too often we speak many words in our prayer, words perhaps of overwhelming anxiety, words of distrust, words of hopelessness, words of fear. Hearing or listening is a good metaphor for prayer. The good pray-er is above all a good listener. Prayer is dialog; it is a personal encounter in love. When we communicate with someone we care about, we speak and we listen. But even our speaking is responsive; what we say depends upon what the other person has said to us. Otherwise we don't have real dialog, but rather two monologues running along side by side.

Jesus tells us that he came so that we would have life and have it more abundantly. He knows how difficult it may be for us to really believe him, which is why he tells us in so many different ways that those who follow him should have no fear because he is the eminently trustworthy shepherd who knows us each by name. When we pick up the daily newspaper or watch the news on TV, it's sometimes hard to think about the possibility of having the abundant life that Jesus promises. The hatred and killing of Palestinians and Israelis in the very land of Jesus, the lethal tribalism among African nations and peoples, people crushed and destroyed by poverty and greed in Latin American countries, and right here at home. The hopelessness that so many people feel in their own personal lives as they struggle with broken relationships, family problems, divorces, addictive behavior, and the disregard for the value of human life.

We hear the reassuring words of Jesus once again: "I came so that they may have life and have it more abundantly. "Our task is to listen with the heart, to what the shepherd and guardian of our souls is telling us, to listen for our name, to hear our call to follow him in a deeply personal relationship, him who is way, truth and life. And in him is our peace.

Al Grosskopf, S.J.