

Today is known as Good Shepherd Sunday because every year on the Fourth Sunday of Easter we hear from the tenth chapter of John's Gospel where Jesus speaks of Himself as our shepherd, who leads us to eternal life. But of course, the flip side of Jesus being our shepherd is that we are His sheep. As mentioned in our Gospel, an interesting fact about sheep is that they have the remarkable quality of knowing their master's voice, and also of instinctively fearing any other voice and fleeing from it. So the question facing each one of us today is, "Are you smarter than a sheep?"

It's a funny question but answering "yes" may not be as easy as you first think. Let's dig a little deeper and see. In sheep herding areas, flocks belonging to different shepherds are often brought together in fenced-off areas for the night, especially during the cooler months. Then in the morning, when the shepherds come out to gather their sheep, they don't have to look for any branding or use any technological gadgetry to pick out their sheep from the mingled flocks. Essentially, the sheep sort themselves out when the shepherd goes to the gate and summons his sheep. Those that recognize his voice run to him. Those that don't retreat in fear. Now, that's actually pretty smart.

In this way, it would seem that sheep may be smarter than most of us. We live in a world that is constantly bombarding us with voices. Some are internal and some are external. During this time of social distancing, the voices may have changed somewhat, but the voices are still there nonetheless. Maybe we're hearing the voice of fear as we lose our jobs or take pay cuts, or as people we know die from the virus.

Maybe we're hearing the voice of loneliness and despair as our worlds are turned upside down, as sporting and entertainment events are cancelled, or as school is conducted in our homes instead of classrooms. Our movement is restricted and we're physically isolated from the people

we love. We can no longer take going to the movies or getting a haircut for granted. Once social beings now find themselves secluded and alone.

And just because we're not as physically mobile right now as we once were, it doesn't mean that these voices are quieter. It's actually quite the opposite and we've got the TV, radio, and internet to thank for that. 24/7, we can tune into a voice that wishes to lead us and our children away from Jesus into immorality and sin. In our Gospel, Jesus calls these voices thieves and robbers because they want to steal the promises Jesus has made us. They want to harm us and lead us astray. Their wish is to ultimately slaughter and destroy the sheep. And instead of fleeing from these voices contrary to Jesus, sometimes, we draw closer and spend more time listening to them. We trust in them. Instead of rejecting them, we let them drown out the voice of God in our lives.

The challenge facing each of us is to listen for Jesus' voice in the midst of these competing voices demanding our attention, assaulting our senses, and loudly challenging our beliefs, values, and loyalties. The goal for us is to be wary, like sheep, and to recognize only one voice: that of the Lord speaking to us, and then flee from every other voice.

A recent study revealed that, 99% of the time, humans are able to recognize the voice of a close friend or relative with only the use of two words. Super computers can't even perform this type of voice recognition with such accuracy. So, we have the ability. Just as we get to know the voice of those closest to us by spending time with them and listening to them, it's the same with Jesus. We have to spend time with Him and listen to His voice. We can only differentiate His voice in all the noise by getting to know His voice and strengthening our relationship with Him.

We do this by reading His words in scripture on a regular basis, by daily quality time spent with Him in prayer and reflection. Once we're able to be together again at Church in a

couple of weeks, we do this by spending time with Him at Mass and during Eucharistic Adoration. But just remember, in order to hear His voice, we not only have to shut out the other voices, we also have to stop talking ourselves long enough to listen to what He is saying to us.

He wants us to know who He is. The Good Shepherd protects and cares for the people of God just as a shepherd does his sheep. It's easy to think during these uncertain times that the shepherd has abandoned his flock. It's simply not true. When the flock is threatened, a good shepherd digs in even more and defends the flock that much more fiercely. A sheep has no greater friend than a good shepherd, and we have no greater friend than Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

The voice of the Good Shepherd calls all of us to a deeper and more spiritually productive life. He calls us to live with dignity in the image of God in which we were all created. Every day, He calls us to conversion, to re-orient our lives, to experience forgiveness and new life only found by following His voice. We may prefer for Jesus to yell loud over the top of the other voices, but that's not how He works. Instead He draws us closer to Him so that we can hear His voice. Only by knowing His voice can we pick it out amongst the noise of the thieves and robbers. Only by following His voice, can we "have life and have it more abundantly."

So, the question remains. In the middle of so much noise and so many voices in our lives today, "Are you smarter than a sheep?"