

Homily for Fourth Sunday of Easter based on John 10: 1-10

- Did you ever walk into a large room filled with mostly strangers? Maybe at a reception or party? Or a restaurant or cafeteria at school? When you first walk in you hear voices, people talking, but it sounds more like a buzz in the room because everyone is in different clusters and they are all talking at the same time. To the outsider walking in, it sounds like jumbled noise.
- And if *you* are that outsider walking in, you might first feel alone, a little out of place, not sure where in that room you should be. So you look around, search for a familiar face. Then you hear a familiar voice call your name. Maybe it is a friend or relative. Suddenly you are more relaxed, feel welcomed. You follow that voice to that table or part of the room they are- where you are comfortable and know you belong. Familiar voices are assuring, comforting, encouraging and helpful.
- Our first readings during the Easter season usually come from a book of the bible called the “Acts of the Apostles”. In this book we read about the experiences of the early Christian community after Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension into heaven.
- This small community of believers lived in a world whose culture, beliefs and values were vastly different from their own. They lived inside the Roman Empire where most people valued money, possessions and positions of power. It was a culture of brutality and excess and little regard for individual life and freedom. Most Romans worshiped idols and false gods. Ethnic groups- Jews, Gentiles, Romans- looked on each other with prejudice and distain. Corrupt rulers ruled the day.
- In the middle of all this was that small group of early Christians. Think of the challenges they faced: rejection, ridicule, even persecution. We read about St. Paul’s efforts to build the early church and spread the Gospel message. He would travel to different areas, preach, form church communities – but right behind him were his critics, spreading lies and false information trying to undo everything he accomplished. Life was full of obstacles for our early brothers and sisters.

- What kept them going? What helped them face the challenges, the critics, and the dangers? What allowed them not only to survive but also to grow and flourish? Today's Gospel reading provides the answer.
- Our Gospel reading makes reference to an activity Shepherds went through daily. At night a number of shepherds would come together with their sheep and put them in a pen. Then the shepherds would sleep while one shepherd stayed awake watching out for thieves and harmful animals. In the morning each shepherd would call out for his own sheep to follow him out to pasture.
- The sheep knew the voice of their own shepherd, ignored all the other voices calling out and would follow only *their own shepherd's voice* when they were called.
- That is exactly what kept those early Christians going. That's what allowed them to survive and flourish. They belonged to the Lord. He knew them: their needs and struggles. And they listened for *His voice*, and followed Him.
- They trusted in that familiar voice. Trusted that if they followed *that* voice - they wouldn't perish. They trusted that no one would be able to snatch them out of the Lord's loving , protective hands.
- And we see the Lord's voice led them to a much different kind of life. Money, possessions, positions of power didn't own them. They lived simple , peaceful lives; putting the love of Jesus and His teachings above all else. They were called to prayer, they shared Eucharist together, they loved and helped each other sharing what gifts they had.
- The Lord's voice led them to a true peace and joy in their life. Not life without some pain and struggle; but life always anchored in the knowledge of the Lord's presence with them; the knowledge that nothing could snatch them out of God's hand; and life anchored in the promise of eternal life.
- And their joy became obvious to many in the world around them. One particular quote, found in the Acts of the Apostles , summarizes the admiration others had for these early Christians, it reads: "See how these Christians love each other". We read in Acts of the Apostles and in our Gospels that many others wanted this joy in their lives – so the early Christian community grew quickly in number.

- And so here we are today. And their story is our story isn't it? Not much is really different.
- We too are called to spread the Gospel message in a world that is still a bit crazy. In a world whose values and beliefs can often be vastly different from our Lord's teachings. Our challenges today are not so different from those that early Christians faced.
- We live in a society where everyone competes for our attention. You can't turn on your television, computer or radio without hearing a voice trying to sell us something or tell us what we need to do or believe.
- We hear many voices in our world like the jumbled noise in a crowded room, like the voices of those "other" shepherds Jesus refers to as "thieves and robbers".
- Some voices call us to desire power or things .
- Some voices call us to fear others, fear what the future holds.
- Some voices call us to indifference and to disregard the value of human life.
- So what keeps us going as a modern day Christian Community? What helps us in the face of these challenges? *The very same thing those early Christians relied on !*
- We must listen carefully for that *familiar voice*, the voice of our shepherd, Jesus. In today's world it takes a conscious effort to do this. To take the time to shut out those other voices so we can listen to Him. If we don't , it is easy to lose touch with Him.
- Here's the amazing thing. If we really try we can hear that familiar voice in so many ways. In our prayers; in our reading of scripture; in our sacraments. If we listen for that familiar voice it is there. And if we follow that voice , Jesus will lead us in every aspect of our lives – because He loves us fiercely. Doesn't it feel great to know that ???
- And that voice is telling us the very same message it spoke to those early Christians: Trust in me; do not be afraid; nothing can harm you or take you from me; follow my teachings; love each other; I will be with you to strengthen you along the way.
- This is where our true joy can be found. And like that world long ago, others will look at us and want to share in that joy.... And we will grow in number.
- It's said that sheep may not be the smartest of creatures, but they are wise enough to know they need their shepherd and

wise enough to recognize his voice. Let us pray for this same wisdom. Amen.