

Homily – Easter 4 – (Year C) – May 12, 2019

ACTS 13:14, 43-52; PS 100:1-2, 3, 5; REV 7:9, 14B-17; JN 10:27-30

My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me. (Jn 10:27)

How do we know whether or not the **voice** we are listening to is actually the voice of **Jesus**?

How can we be confident that we are actually following *Jesus*, the Good Shepherd, and not a false shepherd?

The key indicator is this: **Are we experiencing *what Jesus experienced*...as a result of following him? Does our life resemble his?**

In order to see this more clearly, let's take an expanded look at both the **1st Reading** and the **Gospel** for today's Mass, considering some of the verses that **precede** our **1st Reading**; as well as some of the verses that **precede** and **follow** our **Gospel** passage.

The **1st Reading** today comes from **Acts, Chapter 13**. It **starts at verse 14** and then **jumps to verses 43-52**. That means that we didn't hear **verses 15 through 42**. That's **28 skipped verses**...and knowing what those skipped verses reveal helps us know whether or not we are listening to the voice of Jesus and following him.

We heard in our **1st Reading**:

Paul and Barnabas...reached Antioch in Pisidia. On the sabbath they entered the synagogue and took their seats. (Acts 13:14)

This is **verse 14**. So, let's look at the first couple of skipped verses—**verses 15 and 16**:

After the reading of the law and the prophets, the synagogue officials sent word to them, "My brothers, if one of you has a word of exhortation for the people, please speak." So Paul got up, motioned with his hand, and said, "Fellow Israelites and you others who are God-fearing, listen." (Acts 13:15-16)

Paul's then proceeded to recount how God had saved his **Chosen People** from slavery in Egypt and led them through the desert to the Promised Land. He described how God supplied leaders to keep his people faithful to his Law, right up to the time of King

David. Up to that point, Paul had said nothing that would have upset anyone. He was simply reminding his listeners of **God's love and faithfulness for his people**.

So far, so good.

But things started to get **dicey** when Paul started talking about **Jesus**. He said:

From [David's] descendants God, according to his promise, has brought to Israel a savior, Jesus. (Acts 13:23)

At this point, Paul exposed the “**elephant in the room**”—namely, the **dividing line** between those in the congregation who **accepted Jesus as Messiah** and those who **did not**. No doubt, the **squirming** began in the synagogue right about then!

Paul then shifted into high gear, describing how **John the Baptist** announced the coming of Jesus...and how the **Jewish religious** leaders failed to recognize Jesus as the Messiah and had him **executed**. He proclaimed how Jesus conquered death and appeared to certain of his followers and commissioned them to preach **the Gospel that Jesus is the Christ**.

Some in the congregation certainly didn't want to hear another word of this “**Jesus business**”, *even though* Paul also said:

You must know, my brothers, that through [the Risen Jesus] forgiveness of sins is being proclaimed to you... (Acts 13:38)

By this time, certain listeners **could not** hear the voice of Jesus offering them **mercy**. All they could hear was **condemnation**. And yet...those words of condemnation were in **their own heads and hearts**. They were **not** coming from Paul.

Paul knew that some of this listeners did not accept Jesus as Messiah so, **as an act of charity**, he **invited** them to abandon their unbelief. Paul did not **want** them to cut themselves off from the love and mercy of Jesus being offered them. He wanted them to experience the **same joy** that filled **his heart**.

Nevertheless...all they heard was **condemnation**.

This helps us understand the conflict that erupted in the **1st Reading**:

On the following sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and with violent abuse contradicted what Paul said...[They] incited the women of prominence who were worshipers and the leading men of the city, stirred up a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their territory. (Acts 13:44-45, 50)

Now let's turn to our **Gospel Reading** for today's Mass which comes from **John, Chapter 10, verses 27-30**, still keeping in mind that *an important indication as to whether or not we are actually listening the voice of Jesus and following him is whether or not we are experiencing what he experienced.*

To understand the context of today's Gospel, we'll look at some of the verses that **precede** verse **27** and some of the verses which **follow** verse **30**. By doing so, we will discover an unmistakable parallel between what **Paul and Barnabas** experienced...and what **Jesus** experienced.

Our Gospel passage today begins with these consoling words:

My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me. (Jn 10:27)

But here's what had been happening right **before** Jesus spoke those words. Jesus had identified himself as the **Good Shepherd** in this way:

“When [the Good Shepherd] has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” This figure Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. (Jn 10:4-6)

Jesus' listeners didn't “**get**” what he was saying—that, on the one hand, there is **his voice** calling out to his sheep—and on the other hand, there are **false voices** which mislead the sheep. So, Jesus clarified things:

All who came before me are thieves and robbers; but the sheep did not heed them... The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hireling and not a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hireling and cares nothing for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me...and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd. (Jn 10:7-16)

Here, Jesus exposed the **false shepherds**. Those among his listeners who *fit the description* became **furious** at Jesus because they knew he was referring to **them**.

Nevertheless, Jesus didn't say this to **condemn** them. He called them to **conversion** and **repentance** in order that they *too would enjoy* the care and protection of the Good Shepherd. But, like those who opposed Paul and Barnabas, the **jealously** of certain members of Jesus's congregation *made them deaf to the voice of the Good Shepherd*.

The Gospel continues:

There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. Many of them said, "He has a demon, and he is mad; why listen to him?" Others said, "These are not the sayings of one who has a demon." (Jn 10:19-21)

Jesus' opponents then **confronted** him:

...the Jews gathered round him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe...because you do not belong to my sheep." (Jn 10:24-26)

It is at this point in John's Gospel that the passage for today's Mass begins. In the verses that immediately **follow** today's Gospel, we read:

The Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus answered them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of these do you stone me?" The Jews answered him, "We stone you for no good work but for blasphemy; because you, being a man, make yourself God" ... they tried to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands. (Jn 10:31-33, 39)

Returning now to the **1st Reading** brings us full circle:

When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and with violent abuse contradicted what Paul said...[They]...stirred up a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their territory. (Acts 13:45, 50)

Like Jesus, Paul and Barnabas suffered **violent abuse, contradiction, persecution and threats**, for merely **speaking and living the truth of Jesus**. This is what Jesus meant when he told his Apostles at the **Last Supper**:

Remember the word that I said to you, “A servant is not greater than his master.” If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But all this they will do to you on my account... (Jn 15:20-21)

And, yet, hidden in all of this tribulation is a puzzling statement—the **final verse** in our **1st Reading**:

The disciples were filled with joy and the holy Spirit. (Acts 13:52)

How could Paul and Barnabas be filled with **joy** and the Holy Spirit after suffering for their witness to Jesus?

Because they knew **who they were**...they knew **who Jesus was**...and they knew **what their job was**...and **what their job wasn't**. They were called to **witness to Jesus** and **let the chips fall** where they may.

When I was in France last month, I read a quote from **St. Bernadette** that I had never heard before. **Bernadette Soubirous** was 14 years old when the **Virgin Mary** appeared to her in the little French village of **Lourdes**. She was subjected to **grueling interrogations** by **secular** government officials who **threatened to imprison her and her parents** if she insisted on **visiting the grotto** and **speaking about the “lady”**. This young, illiterate, uneducated girl never wavered despite pressure that would have made an **adult** crack. When the interrogators told her that she had failed to convince them that her visions were authentic, she responded:

“My job is to inform, not to convince.”

Those **eight words** help us understand why Paul and Barnabas could **celebrate—joyfully**—the **suffering** they endured for Jesus. They did what the Lord asked them to do...and left the results in God's hands.

Still, we must ask: **Why does Jesus demand that we follow his path of suffering?**

The **answer**: Because of where it **leads!**

In the **Gospel** today, Jesus said:

I give [my sheep...I give those who follow me...] eternal life... (Jn 10:28)

And our **1st Reading** said:

All who were destined for eternal life came to believe... (Acts 13:48-49)

If we think of this word “**destined**” in terms of “**destination**”, then we naturally want to know **the way** to that final destination—eternal life.

But we **do** know the way, because Jesus revealed it to us when he said:

In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me. (Jn 14:2-6)

The **Letter to the Hebrews** puts it all in perspective:

...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb 12:1-2)

The more a person is **conformed** to Christ, the more his or her life **resembles** the life of Christ.

And that is because Jesus invites us to a level of **intimacy with him** that carries us **through** the **suffering** and into the **joy** that was set before for **him**...a joy that **he** longs to share with **us** for eternity.

The suffering that comes from a faithful relationship to Jesus, **then**, is not a cause for **alarm**.

It’s an **indication** that we’re on the right path. The path to **eternal life**.