TENDER AS A MOTHER’S LOVE

It was undoubtedly one of the most unusual funeral processions ever witnessed. It took place about seven years ago in South Africa. For 12 hours, two herds of wild South African elephants slowly made their way through the Zululand bush until they reached the house of Lawrence Anthony. You probably have heard of the “horse whisperer” and the “dog whisperer.” Lawrence Anthony was the “elephant whisperer.” He was a conservationist born in Johannesburg who had a passion for the African bush and its tribes and animals. In particular he found a way to communicate with wild elephants when he was called by a conservation group to rescue a group of nine elephants who had escaped their enclosure and were wreaking havoc and about to be shot. Communicating with the matriarch of the herd through the tone of his voice and body language, he eventually rescued them and brought to his game reserve.

When Lawrence died his family reported that the elephants whose lives he had saved made their way to the compound of the man they loved to say their goodbyes. They stayed around for two days before making their way back into the bush. How did they know Lawrence had died? How did they know where to go? What kind of amazing bond had this man forged with these wild creatures, these formerly violent rogue elephants whom he rescued and rehabilitated? In his book he describes his first encounters with the herd who had broken out of a compound and became a threat. A group of locals as well as wildlife authorities were armed with elephant rifles, ready to take the herd down when they found it. Lawrence and his search party had to act fast and find a way to bring the herd back to the compound. They did, but the elephants’ bid for freedom had, if anything, increased their resentment at being kept in captivity.

Lawrence encountered the matriarch whom he called Nana. He wrote about the encounter: “Nana watched my every move, hostility seeping from every pore, her family behind her. There was no doubt that sooner or later they were going to make another break for freedom. Then, in a flash, came the answer. I would live with the herd. To save their lives, I would stay with them, feed them, talk to them. But, most importantly, be with them day and night. We all had to get to know each other.”
How strikingly close are the “elephant whisperer’s” wisdom and insight to the life of Jesus who speaks to us so tenderly in the gospel about his abiding love and presence in our lives: My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. The image Jesus gives us today is an image of close relationship. Middle Eastern shepherds live with and bond with their sheep. The shepherd will name them and the sheep will recognize the voice of their shepherd. They follow as he calls because the shepherd is imprinted on the very psyche of the sheep. He is, in a sense, incarnated in them. They are bonded together and the flock is one with the shepherd.

Earlier in chapter 10 of John’s gospel Jesus says: The gatekeeper opens it for him, and the sheep hear his voice, as he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has driven out all his own, he walks ahead of them, and the sheep follow him, because they recognize his voice. This verse is all about remembering and recognizing and recalling what it means to be loved by Christ. Anthony Lawrence had to earn the elephant’s trust so that she would listen to his voice.

The challenge facing every follower of Jesus today is to listen for the Master’s voice in the middle of the many competing voices and sounds that demand our attention, conflicting noises assaulting our senses, and dissonant messages loudly challenging our beliefs, our values and our loyalties. Today, we hear the sounds of extremism from so many sides, the sounds of terrorism that try to justify their atrocities, the sounds of scandal that come from places in the Church we never expected, the sounds of government leaders and politicians who try to justify or cover-up the massive problems in our society. The sounds of prominent people who exhibit racial prejudices without any remorse. Those sounds are powerful, whether they come via the internet or television, from song lyrics and commercials, from newspapers or movie icons. Certainly, these voices have always been around. But today they seem even louder and more pervasive because they’re amplified by the media.

In the midst of all the noise there is always the voice of the Good Shepherd, the Lord speaking to us through his Word and Sacrament, through the community and the Church, through the Spirit dwelling in our hearts. That voice calls us to a deeper, more honest and more spiritually productive life. Jesus uses images that are quite familiar to his audience as he speaks about the sheep, the shepherd and the sheep gate. He knew that the sheep don’t follow a strange voice, but only the one they trust, the one that is invested in their wellbeing, the one who will lead them to cool waters and green pastures.
Isn’t that the voice of leadership we look for – someone who will encourage and affirm us in our endeavors, someone who will tell us when we are on the right path. But we also need leadership that will challenge us to be our better selves, to go beyond the present limitations and strive to reach new and greater possibilities. We need someone who can show us how to live graciously with the burdens of life -- and the disappointments and losses we all must face. We have such a leader in Jesus, the Good Shepherd, if we will but listen to his voice above all the others.

Certainly if anyone embodies that spirit, our mothers whom we honor today on Mothers’ Day celebration do. The wisdom of Pope Francis is very apropos here. In an interview with America magazine, Pope Francis asked, “How are we treating the people of God?” He answers his own question: “I dream of a church that is a mother and a shepherdess. The church’s ministers must be merciful, take responsibility for the people and accompany them like the Good Samaritan, who washes, cleans and raises up his neighbor. This is pure Gospel.” Perhaps mothers, more than any others, live this pure gospel as they care for their children. One mom wrote about her experience of trying to be a “good shepherdess” for her children. She said she’s pretty good in ‘crisis mode’-- leaving the 99 to go after the one stray. She thinks her children sometimes conspire: OK, your turn near the cliff’s edge today; I’ll take next week. Much harder for her is the daily grind -- the monotony, lack of gratitude, and just plain boredom of being available every single day, every hour of every day -- with never-ending needs: I’m hungry. Watch me. I can’t find my shoes. He keeps looking at me. I don’t want to take a nap.

She recounts this incident: Last year I had to be gone for a week to deal with a family emergency, leaving my husband with the three younger kids. He invited his mother to come and help out. One day the school called. The 8-year-old was running a fever. Over the phone I diagnosed strep throat and insisted he get to the pediatrician. (I was right.) When he finally got home with the sick kid, his mom had supper on the table. My husband was grateful and uttered words I’ll never let him forget: “Wow, this mothering business is a two-man job.” Being good shepherds and shepherdesses is a job for each of us. May the grace of God we receive at this Eucharist give us strength to carry out the role well.

John Kasper, OSFS