Homily – 4th Sunday of Easter (C)

*Acts 13:14, 43-52, Rev. 7:9, 14-17 & Jn. 10:27-30*

One of the things I find most difficult returning to Oxford each term from vacation back at Ampleforth is the readjustment needed to cope with “noise”. While Benet’s is – by and large and mercifully – a relatively quiet place to live, even when our students are here, one only has to walk out onto St Giles, or down Cornmarket or The High to be only too aware of what a noisy place a city can be. There are the “mechanical” noises – traffic, ambulance and police sirens, planes overhead. There are also the “human” noises – the buskers, good and bad, the “Big Issue” sellers and, of course, the hordes of screaming French and Spanish and Chinese schoolchildren outside the Ashmolean and McDonalds and KFC. Perhaps most perplexing, to me at least, are those who seem to find the city is not noisy *enough*, and who wander around, headphones glued to ears, eyes glued to their mobile-screens – people who wrap themselves in a cocoon of noise to keep the world outside at bay.

What made it even more difficult this term is the fact that I spent much of last week at Douai Abbey, helping to teach on the EBC & National Office for Vocations training course for Vocation Guides. The course brings together a variety of different people – priests, religious and lay men and women – and seeks to help them learn the skills needed to help young people (and the not-so young!) discern their call from God. This was the sixth time we had run the course, and by now we have trained just under a hundred people from all regions of England and Wales to form a network of “vocations supporters”, guides who have the skills and personality needed to promote and sustain discernment. It is always an intensive experience, and at its heart lies the most intensive element of all – a 3-hour session in which we practise “active listening skills” with all the participants. Each in turn acts as a speaker – telling a little story about themselves and their spiritual journey, then as a listener – listening intently to the speaker and using probing questions to help them reflect more deeply on their own story, and then lastly as observer – offering critical support to the listener to help refine their skills. Each group also has a member of the team, who acts as a facilitator and second observer, and who helps and encourages good practice. It is absolutely exhausting, particularly for the team observer, since you are listening so hard and for so long – but it is also incredibly rewarding, especially when people improve visibly and gain more confidence. Above all, however, it stresses that it is “listening” which is at the heart of all discernment.

In that short gospel we have just heard, Jesus makes something like the same point. He says to those around him “the sheep that belong to me listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me” (Jn.10:27). At the heart of discipleship, the Lord tells us there lies that one indispensable quality – the quality of listening. It is only when we *listen* that we can hear Jesus’ voice; like sheep, it is only when we hear and recognise the voice of one we know to be the shepherd that we will start to follow. There is no discipleship, no following, until we have heard and recognised the voice of the Lord, the voice of the Good Shepherd. No wonder, then, that St Benedict begins his Rule with the word “Listen”. No wonder that he sets before his monks at the beginning of every day the words of Psalm 94: “O that today you would listen to his voice, harden not your hearts...”

And in John’s gospel, Jesus’ voice is very special. Again and again in John, unlike in the Synoptics, Jesus speaks to people by name. Think back to last Sunday’s gospel, and to those three questions Jesus asks: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Think back to that story of Mary’s encounter with the Risen Christ on the morning of the resurrection; it is only when he says “Mary”, when he calls her by name, that she realises who he is. Jesus’ voice is not that of the street vendor touting for trade, not that of the broadcaster hoping someone might tune in. Jesus’ voice is deeply personal, he calls us by name. In that voice of the Lord he shows he knows us, and we come to recognise him, if only we will listen.

That listening, as I suggested earlier, can be very hard work, can be just as exhausting as following. It is hard not to let that “still small voice” be drowned by the myriad voices which surround us each day in our busy lives. It is hard not to let that “still small voice” be overwhelmed by the many “inner voices” which rise from our own hearts, our desires, our ambitions, our self-regard, voices which can be like the iPod of the soul if we jam our headphones on too tightly. Yet we need to make the effort to listen, hard as it may be, exhausting as it may be, lest we become like those whom Jesus first took pity on: *harassed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd* (Mk 6:34). That is not what he wills for his flock.

The middle Sundays of Advent and of Lent – *Gaudete* and *Laetare* – both have a special character of rejoicing, a rejoicing we mark with rose vestments and flowers and music, even amidst those penitential seasons. Perhaps too, we should try to find some special note of rejoicing at this mid-point of Eastertide. For the Lamb once slain now lives forever, and has become our true shepherd. He has called each one of us by name, and now we belong to him, and no one can steal us away from his sheepfold. It is he who leads us to the springs of living water, to the pastures of eternal life, to this banquet he has prepared for us in which he will serve us his own Body and Blood to be our food. O that today we might listen to his voice – for it is he who leads us. Amen.

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16.4.16

# Bidding Prayers: 4th Sunday of Easter (C) – 2016

Fr O: Let us pray for the Church:

We pray especially for our Holy Father Pope Francis, for our Bishop Bernard, and for all the Bishops, and for all who hold a ministry of service in the Holy Church of God.

May God keep them faithful to the example of Christ, the Good Shepherd, in guiding and protecting his flock, that we may reach the eternal life prepared for us.

On this world day of prayer for vocations to the priestly and religious life, let us pray for all who are discerning God’s call:

May the Holy Spirit enkindle the hearts of many men and women to heed the message of the Gospel, and following the example of Christ, to offer themselves completely in the service of God’s people. We pray especially for our own junior monks, Alberic and Benedict, and for more vocations to our community at Ampleforth.

Let us pray for priests and religious throughout the world:

May their lives always be a witness to the love of Christ and to the joy of the Spirit by whom they have been consecrated, and may they have the gifts of perseverance and of fruitfulness.

Let us pray for peace:

May Christ, the prince of peace, send forth his Spirit of peace and reconciliation in all the world, to unite all peoples in harmony, justice and right-living. We pray especially for all those involved in conflict, for those killed and injured by terrorist activity, and for those forced from their home and family by poverty and war.

Let us pray for ourselves:

May we find joy on this day of the resurrection, knowing that the Risen Christ is in our midst, and let us ask for the grace of a disciple’s ear and a listening heart as we seek to follow him more closely.

Hail Mary...