

**EASTER FOURTH SUNDAY YEAR C 2010 HOMILY (GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY)
(Acts 13: 14, 43-52; Revelation 7: 9, 14b-17; John 10: 27-30)**

WE HEAR THE SHEPHERD'S VOICE IN PRAYER

There is a story about the famous monk, Thomas Merton (d. 1968) that tells us something about hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd. Merton belonged to the Abbey of Gethsemani, the Trappist monastery near Bardstown, Kentucky. This is where I go for my annual retreat. It is a highly wooded area and occasionally a forest fire will break out in the surrounding hills. In the time of Merton, the local farmers would go out themselves to battle the blaze and the monks would go out too. One time Merton was leading a group of novices to the area of the fire with their shovels and brooms. Suddenly the monastery bells rang for the Angelus prayer that is traditionally said three times a day. Merton ordered the young men to stop in their tracks and to say the prayer in honor of Mary's "yes" which gave us Jesus our Savior. One of the novices later wrote: "The very idea of it made me laugh. It all seemed so incongruous, praying there while the flames crackled and spread through the dry grass and leaves [in the near distance] behind us. But then it struck me that prayer is always incongruous" (James Finley: *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*, Notre Dame, Ave Maria Press, 1978, p. 115).

Yes, prayer is always incongruous because the demands of life will consume us if we let them. There will never be time for prayer in our busy lives unless we make the time. The forests of our many and varied activities and the fires that we have to battle daily will seduce us into thinking there is no way we can fit in talking to God. Prayer is always something strange to a world that does not pray. And prayer is always a profound witness to this same world. It can seem to make no sense when there is so much to do and to experience to pause for prayer. And yet prayer is the rock foundation of the Christian life.

In the little short Gospel today from St. John, Jesus tells us that his sheep hear his voice and they know him by his voice and they follow him. And he says to us that this relationship between shepherd and flock leads us to eternal life, as the Father wishes who has entrusted us to Christ. Of course, we hear his voice in many ways – through the scriptures, through the sacraments, through each other, through the experience of nature and beauty and art and culture, and above all through giving and receiving love. But it is essential to actually speak to Jesus and to hear him speak back to us in our hearts. We can hear the shepherd's voice in all the ways I mentioned above, but we will not know him in the uniquely intimate act of praying until we stop everything and pray – with the flames of all our duties and responsibilities crackling in the background.

We pray because we must. We pray because it is foolish not to pray. We pray because of a simple desire for God. We do not pray to attain some goal of holiness but simply to be with God through Christ the Good Shepherd. We do not pray to perfect some "technique" of prayer. We do not pray to feel good by telling ourselves that at least we are going through some meaningless motions of rote words – unlike so many who do not pray at all. Rote words and not praying at all can be closely related unless we are truly reflecting on the memorized words. We pray because this is the only way to really live and breathe. And not only does prayer make us truly alive but, incidentally and inevitably, we give witness to our Christian faith when we pray. So I say to everyone: take the time to pray. Adults: pray every day alone and with your spouse and family; have the courage to take time out from work and play and socializing in order to pray. Teenagers: don't be afraid to be seen at prayer in the chapel of your Catholic high school or your parish church – not because you want to draw attention to yourself but because you need to be close to Jesus. Little children, run to Jesus the Good Shepherd in prayer whenever you can and let your prayer mature as you grow up.

As I said above, it is foolish not to pray. And yet we are tempted to think precisely that it is foolish to pray when there is so much to do and experience and enjoy – so many pleasures and diversions to plunge into. One of the obstacles to human growth is our fear of making fools of ourselves. But, as St. Paul says, we are called to be fools for Christ (1 Corinthians 4: 10). We are called to risk failure in order to grow and learn and to risk complete failure to grow into Christ. It is wisdom and not folly to be foolish in the eyes of the world in order to be in touch with Jesus in prayer. He is the Good Shepherd who (as the second reading from Revelation today proclaims) is also the Lamb of God who has washed us clean in his blood and who leads us by example. He who is Shepherd became one of the flock to give an example of goodness and to lead us to the Father.

So be foolish. Be incongruous. Pray when you have no time for it. Pray when you don't feel like it. Pray when people think you're stupid for doing so. Pray when it seems that everything around you is going up in flames. Pray because you will die if you don't. Pray to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd who became the biggest fool in history so that we could be wise sheep who follow him to resurrection and new life!