

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter (Year A) – May 7, 2017

ACTS 2:14A, 36-41; PS 23: 1-3A, 3B4, 5, 6; 1 PT 2:20B-25; JN 10:1-10

It's difficult for a priest who celebrates **Mass** every day...who goes to **Confession** every couple of weeks...and who has **intimate prayerful contact with God** on a daily basis...to even *imagine* a **week**—not to mention a *habit of living*—that does not include **Mass on Sunday**...every...Sunday.

It's *unfathomable* to think of **Sunday without God**...where Sunday is, for all intents and purposes, really just a **second Saturday**—one of *two weekend days* that get just as overloaded with activities as a busy workday during the week...the only difference being the *type* of activity that fills up the calendar with more **stress**...and no **rest**.

The **Sabbath Rest**—which demands that we protect the Lord's Day from becoming just another day that adds to our anxiety—is such an **afterthought**, if not a *pipe-dream* for many people, that it doesn't even **occur** to them to stop running long enough to recognize that they lack peace in their lives.

It's a vicious cycle that is very effectively orchestrated by the Devil to make us **deaf to the voice of the Good Shepherd**—*Jesus*. Making Sunday just as crazy and stressful as any other day of the week, and then having to **maintain** this manic practice in order to avoid facing the utter lack of peace and joy that our choice causes in our lives, is truly a form of insanity. **The Devil knows this!**

So he encourages us to keep **moving**, to keep **distracting ourselves** so we don't have to face the **pain**, the **emptiness**, the **lack of any sense of who we really are** and **what our life is really about**. After all, if we aren't even aware of this habit, then we'll remain enslaved to it. **The Devil knows this too!**

It's not hard to spot this pattern in our lives. We get the latest **smart phone** and are already clamoring for the next one, next year. **Women** buy ridiculously expensive **purses**; **men** spend a fortune on elaborately self-indulgent "**man-caves**".

And yet, can't even **enjoy what we have now** because the **very nature of consumerism**—of seeking our happiness in the "things" of this world—keeps us **perpetually dissatisfied**, always looking for the **next new** thing, even as we have just obtained the newest version available now.

What a nightmare to finally wake up and discover that the life we have constructed for

ourselves is nothing more than an **endless repetition of seven-day cycles** full of the pursuit of **things** and **experiences** that cannot satisfy the soul.

Most people *know* that **material goods, entertainment, and distractions** cannot bring us lasting happiness and yet the evidence shows that many people **clearly** listen to the deceptive words of the **Father of Lies**—when he tells us that *if we just get more things that can't satisfy us, that one day they will somehow—magically—satisfy us!* When we stop to consider the absurdity of the Devil's temptations—we recognize them for the **irrational nonsense** that they are.

Now, compare the Devil's lies to **Christ's** words:

*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you.*  
(Jn 14:27)

In other words, the world doesn't even **have** lasting peace to *offer*, but if you look at the way **most people**—including, perhaps, **most Catholics**—actually live their lives, they're obviously listening more to the **Liar—the Devil**—than to the **Lord** because, while they might have a **houseful of stuff...**and a **calendar full of activities...**their soul remains *empty*.

Jesus said in today's Gospel:

*...whoever enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep...the sheep hear his voice, as he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...he walks ahead of them, and the sheep follow him, because they recognize his voice. But they will not follow a stranger; they will run away from him, because they do not recognize the voice of strangers."* (Jn 10:2-5)

The sheep follow the **Good Shepherd** because they recognize his voice. On the other hand, what can we say about those who do **not** follow the **Good Shepherd**, but who *do* follow **strangers**?

If some sheep follow the **thief** and a **robber**, it's because they don't recognize the Good Shepherd's voice. Small wonder that they can't even **hear** the Lord's voice—let alone *recognize* it—because their ears are probably covered with **Beats by Dr. Dre™** headphones, just as their peace is smothered by anxiety that accumulates in a soul overloaded with constant **distractions**.

Some of these tactics of the Devil are fairly easy to spot. But we must also consider the **more subtle ways** that the Devil operates, *especially when drawing our children away from Jesus*.

The Devil very often takes advantage of the **good intentions of parents** in order to draw kids away from the Lord. Many parents, for example, have their kids involved in lots of different activities—from **sports**, to **music**, to **dance**, to **martial arts**, to **Scouts**—in order to keep their kids away from **drugs**, **violence** and **other threats**. *That's a noble idea*.

But when even those **good activities** encroach on the family's relationship with God—when, for example, **a sports tournament lures a family away from Sunday Mass**—then we can see how the Devil plays on even the *noble intentions of parents* to introduce dangerous threats to the family's relationship with God. If we adults make our kids just as strung out and frazzled as we are by *keeping them so busy that there's barely time to breathe*, then we have no right to be surprised when they're too busy or too tired to even **think** about God.

The long-term fallout of such a family dynamic is that, when the kids get older and face the inevitable difficulties of living in **a world that is at constant odds with their faith**—though they may have a room full of **awards** and **trophies**—without a genuine relationship with Jesus, they will neither know **who they are**, nor will they know *how to turn to the Lord* to counter the threats, not only to their **faith**, but *especially* to their very **identity**. They will only know the dynamics of **this world** and they will seek **worldly solutions** to ease their **loneliness** and **pain**.

That's why **depression**, acts of self-harm like **cutting**, and even thoughts of **suicide**—so very **heartbreaking** and **gut wrenching** to see in a young boy or girl with so much promise—do not shock a priest who is *well versed in spiritual warfare*. If we cut ourselves off from Jesus...we lose our **identity**. *This is a basic spiritual truth*.

If we don't acknowledge this, then we will remain blind—perhaps *willfully* blind—to the causes of the insane idea of **a flexible identity defined by one's feelings**—the way so many people “**identify**” themselves according to criteria which are in obvious conflict with **biological** and **spiritual** reality...not to mention, plain old **common sense**.

Peter said to the people of Jerusalem in our 1<sup>st</sup> Reading from Acts of the Apostles:

*For the promise is made to you and to your children and to all those far off, whomever the Lord our God will call.* (Act 2:39)

We can see that what's at stake here affects **multiple generations**. God the Father **offers** his love...and Jesus *speaks* this love to every generation. Those who are either **directly responsible** for young people, such as **parents**; as well as those of us who are **more indirectly responsible** for young people, such as **spiritual mothers and fathers**; have a solemn duty to **first cultivate our own ability** to *hear and recognize* the **Good Shepherd's voice**...so that we can teach the generations after us how to do the same.

Jesus tells us what's at stake:

*A thief comes only to steal and slaughter and destroy; I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.* (Jn 10:10)

The images of the **sheepfold**, the **Good Shepherd**, and the **thief and robber** offer an accurate description of the battle that is waged **every moment** of **every day** by the Devil to lure **your** soul...and **my** soul...and the souls **of our children**... away from God.

If we are **naïve** about this battle—if we consider questions of faith to be little more than **pious thoughts** that have no impact **on**—and which are less important *than*—our **careers**, our **material possessions**, our **pursuit of pleasure** and the **other worldly concerns** that dominate our *every waking hour*—then we **will** be led astray from **peace, joy and happiness**, not to mention our very *identity* as beloved sons and daughters of God the Father.

Jesus *“came that [we] might have life and have it more abundantly.”*

If we can't **hear**...can't *recognize*...his voice, then how on earth will we ever find our way to **abundant life** that **Jesus** has prepared for us, when the thief and robber—the **Devil**—is laboring—without a moment's rest—to lead us down the path of **death and destruction**?

If we can't hear the Lord's voice in the course of our daily lives, then we need to **clean out our ears**—*spiritually speaking*.

Thanks to the love and mercy of God, there *is* a place where we can go to have our *spiritual hearing restored*...and to *reconnect to the Good Shepherd*.

That place...is the **Confessional**.