

## Knowing Jesus' Voice

My dog Gruffy reacts differently to me than other people who pass by our house. If a stranger has the gall to walk down 15A street my Wheaton Terrier goes wild. His bark is enough to leave people thinking there is a ferocious canine on the other side of the door. However, when I walk down our pathway Gruffy remains silent, only barking occasionally. As soon as I say his name and he hears my voice the barking then stops and I am greeted warmly.

When I phone Peggy at the hospital to speak with her and the unit clerk answers the phone in the emergency department, I introduce myself by name and tell her who I am, Peggy's husband. When Peggy then comes to the phone I don't say to her, Hello Dr. Thomson, this is your husband Jonathan Gibson speaking. No, I say, "Hi honey, we've called so the kids and I can say good night."

Both my dog, and even more importantly my wife, know my voice, because they know me. Other dogs and other people, like the unit clerk, don't know me and so my voice means nothing to them. In the passage from the Gospel of John this morning Jesus teaches us that we can come to recognize his voice in ways akin to Gruffy and Peggy knowing mine. As he so often did, Jesus uses everyday images to teach spiritual truths. At verse 3 he says: "The gatekeeper opens the gate for the shepherd, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice." This is a wonderful couple a verses because they tell us that as we hear Jesus' voice we hear Jesus call us by name, which is personal and then as one of the sheep-herd, which is communal, we follow him.

Jesus is teaching us an important biblical truth here. As we experience Jesus' presence in our lives we come to know that we belong to him. But as we grow in knowing we are his, we also realize that we are to be part of the sheep-herd, or the church. When I became an active Christian back in 1982 I began to associate almost immediately with other Christians. Since then I have been following Jesus. During these past twenty years we have covered some wonderful and some difficult terrain together. I couldn't imagine doing it without Jesus as my shepherd and without the company of other sheep.

It is in the nature of knowing Jesus and being known by him that the more we share in the communal life of the church the more we will know personally that he calls each of us by name. Let me illustrate what I mean by this with a story. A couple of

weeks ago there were some people who wanted prayer for a particular on-going challenge in the lives of one of the folk. As the four of us gathered for prayer there was a way in which Jesus touched the life of the person we were praying for. A week later this person said, "You know my situation isn't any different, but I'm different this week. Next week I may need prayer again to carry on. But you know since we prayed last week, I have wakened every more with a hymn or chorus on my lips and I have perspective. One of the other people who was there said: "You know so have I". It is also worth mentioning that it was the first time this other person had ever prayed out loud without a prayer book. This person was able to overcome a fear that her prayers would somehow be inadequate. As we share in the communal life, we come to know Jesus' care for us personally even more.

It is worth noting that most villages had large communal sheepfolds. Therefore sheep belonging to different shepherds would be mixed together. After the watering and playing were over the shepherds one by one would each call their sheep with a peculiar call and would then lead them out of the fold.

What is characteristic of Jesus voice is that his words are filled with grace and truth. Those who hear his voice listen for these words as they come to us in scripture, through others, in prayer and in various other ways be it dreams or his voice as he speaks to us within.

To say that his words are grace-filled means that we can know that Jesus is for us. We don't have to live, so to speak, under a continuous low-lying black cloud. To know the grace of Jesus is to know the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. He is like a strong wind that magnificently clears the air, freeing us from the tyranny of sin and discouragement. To say that Jesus' words are also truth-filled means that they are words that will require us to look at our lives more deeply than we had before. There is a way for us to become more honest as we grow in our relationship with Jesus. Not only are we honest in what we say, but we are more able to hear the truth about ourselves. Denial is a game we play less and less as we hear Jesus' voice more fully.

Let me explain this with a personal story. Back in 1991 I had given a sermon at a mid-week service at the church where I was an assistant, Holy Nativity. Attending this service were some people from the diocese who had a meeting at Holy Nativity that day. In the course of my preaching I had said something that was wrong about an historical figure named John Wesley. A priest at the service, Doug Skoyles came up to me and challenged me after the service, saying that I needed to correct the error before people left or he would do it for me. I admitted my error but I was burning inside. I felt he had no right to approach me like that.

For a number of months I didn't think much of Doug Skoyles. But you know what? A year or so later when I went through an emotional breakdown, Doug Skoyles was the priest I turned to. I knew I could trust him to tell the truth to me but I also knew he loved me as he extended Jesus grace to me. From 1993 - 1996 I saw Doug regularly. During that time I always knew I was loved and in that setting I could hear the truth and grow-up.

As we look at the passage from John 10 Jesus is saying here that we have to be very careful who we listen to. Look at verse 7: Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." Jesus is using an analogy to teach us that if we are to come to know who God is it has to be through him. Not all paths to God are equally valid. This is because Jesus is the one who is able to save us from the power of sin as it expresses itself in so many guises. Jesus refers to these destructive powers by saying at verse 10: "The thief comes only to steal, kill and destroy." He then contrasts this with what he desires for us: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." This life Jesus is speaking of is what the bible also calls growing in holiness. The two ways of life described in verse 10 are illustrated in the following overhead. (Explain the overhead) As we grow in living the life Jesus wants for us then God's original plan for us is renewed as we learn to live holy lives in relation to him ourselves and other people.

If we are to grow in living life abundantly three absolute changes are necessary. There must be a change in our consciousness. There must be a change in our convictions and there must be a change in our conscience. These changes happen as we listen to Jesus voice, which is full of grace and truth.

Consciousness involves knowledge. Before we can know what it means to follow Jesus we must first understand Jesus words found in the scripture. The Old Testament Psalmist wrote in psalm 19:7

The law of the Lord is perfect,  
 reviving the soul;  
 the decrees of the Lord are sure,  
 making wise the simple;  
 10 More to be desired are they than gold,  
 even much fine gold;  
 sweeter also than honey,

and drippings of the honeycomb.

Moreover by them is your servant warned;  
in keeping them there is great reward.

As we come to know Jesus voice we will grow in wanting to obey him. For as he says in John 14:15" If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

Now let's say that a person could accidentally obey God's word just as a person could accidentally obey the law. But such an action would have no moral value to it. Suppose a man enjoys driving his car at seventy kilometres an hour. It pleases him to ride at that rate of speed. He drives his car at seventy kilometres an hour in a seventy kilometre an hour zone and in a thirty kilometre an hour zone. When he drives in the seventy kilometres zone his is going the speed limit. He is obeying the law. But when he does seventy in the thirty zone he is a menace to those around him. Suppose our mythical driver systematically refuses to look at the speed limit signs. He averts his gaze from any sign that even appears to mark a speed limit. He keeps himself purposely unconscious of speed limits. At times he just happens to obey the law, but purely by coincidence. If the man wants to achieve moral virtue as a driver and always drive within the speed limit he must first become aware, he must become conscious of the law.

At times a person exercise an act that is in keeping with the mind of Christ, be it giving some money to the poor or forgiving someone. People will say I am a fairly decent person, doesn't that really make me a Christian? But there are other areas of their life that are being lived in a way that is contrary to the will of Christ. They may be prayer-less people or those who have no regard for the Bible. Or they may be so hard on themselves that they don't know what it is to live under grace. Therefore we need to be conscious of the word of God. With the psalmist we are learning to pray that by "studying your word is your servant warned and in keeping it is great reward."

But consciousness is not enough. We all have seen people who are quite conscious of the speed limits while they are violating them. I do not have to look beyond myself to discover the culprit. For our behaviour to change we need to move beyond consciousness to conviction.

Conviction is a matter of depth and intensity. It is one thing to be aware that a certain action is right. It is another thing to have a conviction about it. A conviction is

knowledge that is settled. When Jesus says at verse 9: "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." he is talking about conviction. As we grow in knowing Jesus' voice we will have a growing sense of conviction as to how we are to live our lives. Jesus word is increasingly having a firm hold on us. It goes beyond our brains and penetrates the conscience or we could say our soul. This is what happened to me in the mid nineties as I heard the grace-filled truth about myself in a way I had not been able to previously.

Our conscience acts as a kind of governor upon our behaviour. It is the inner voice that either accuses or excuses us. It monitors our behaviour by way of approval or disapproval. The problem is that our conscience doesn't always tell us the truth. We are adept at training it in the direction of self-approval or self-destruction. We have a tendency to either think too highly of ourselves, excusing behaviour, or we have too low an opinion of ourselves, blaming ourselves for everything. So for the conscience to function in a way that is centred on Jesus it must be influenced by godly convictions. At verse five when Jesus says "They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." he is talking about conscience.

To gain consciences, our consciousness of Jesus' will for us must be sharpened. This involves our minds being shaped by Jesus' voice. As we become more aware of how consciousness, conviction and conscience work together than like sheep in relation to their shepherd, dogs in relation to their masters and husbands in relation to their wives, we will come to recognize Jesus' voice so that we can have life and have life abundantly.