

Hearing Voices

Jesus says: “The shepherd calls his sheep by name and leads them out. The sheep follow him because they know his voice.”

You may be pleased to learn that, before going to seminary, those seeking to be ordained, who would become priests, have to undergo a psychological examination. The aim is to screen out the mentally disturbed and unbalanced. Of course, this pre-seminary evaluation doesn't help with those who go off while in seminary or after ordination, but at least bishops can say that their priests weren't crazy when they started out! In any event, over winter break during my senior year of college, I drove to a large office complex on the other side of town to the office of an industrial psychologist for my evaluation. The examination consisted of several questionnaires. Some of the questions were straightforward, others didn't seem all that relevant. One question, though, I hesitated to answer. I asked the psychologist about it when we sat down afterwards to go over the results. I told him how one question had caught me up. “Oh, yeah? Which question was that?” he asked. “Do you hear voices?” “Well, do you?” he asked “Of course I hear voices! That's why I'm here! Because I heard God tell me to become a priest.” While others I'm sure would deem that to be grounds for my immediate committal, I'm glad to say that this admission did not prevent me from going into ministry.

I've shared with you before, I think, how I received the call to ordination, how God had to make it as plain as day, giving me not one but two visions. I guess I was so hardheaded that I needed God to tell me twice in order to get the message through to me. Still, I know that others have also needed clear divine direction before they could step out in faith. St. Peter, for instance. Before he would agree to share the gospel with Gentiles, non-Jews, God had to come to him and tell him it was wasn't right to exclude those not like him, those considered unclean. Or take St. Francis of Assisi. God told him to “go and repair My church,” and so he repaired it, by reforming the Medieval church through the order of monks he founded. Indeed, Church history is peppered with stories of divine callings—St. Paul, St. Patrick, St. Augustine, St. Teresa of Avila, and many others.

As romantic as these stories might seem, many of us wish God would speak so to us too, that He would give us clear, incontrovertible direction in our lives. Because, it's not all too clear what God wants from us sometimes and it's hard to recognize God's voice. Jesus says, “My sheep know my voice” and we want it to be true, that you and I hear his voice and always follow him. But we are not always sure that it is so.

Arguably, it's harder today than ever before. Our world has become a very noisy place. Every day we are inundated by competing voices calling to us. “Buy this, try that, click here, want this,” they say. Wherever we go, wherever we look, we are accosted with someone or something speaking to us, speaking *at us*, filling our minds, grabbing our attention. Pop music piped in over the store speakers, news or sports blaring on TVs in barber shops and airport terminals, talk radio or music or podcasts playing in our cars., the sound of TV chatter lulling us to sleep at night. Our

days are filled with noise, with distraction, with things that drown out the still small voice of God.

Thing is, though, even if we turn off the radio and unplug the TV or computer, we soon find that it doesn't bring us peace, because *the voices in our heads* quickly fill the silence. I'm not talking about "hearing voices," as in auditory hallucinations. I'm talking about the constant chattering of our thoughts, our "inner monologue," if you will—the nattering on of trivial concerns, the rehearsal of petty preoccupations, the litany of injustices done to us and debts owed to us, the nagging anxieties. A great cacophony of voices competing for our attention, and filling our heads with worries, self-blame, and criticisms, things the Enemy uses to tear us down and weaken our faith.

And yet when we are talking about the problem of hearing God's voice, it's not the inner voices we immediately think of as the problem, but rather the voices outside us, the voice of society and our culture. And there is plenty of reason for this. I mean, we are social creatures, and are heavily influenced by those around us. When the rest of society seems to be saying one thing, and you sense God saying something different, it makes you second-guess whether you heard God correctly or whether you heard him at all. So powerful is the influence of those around us.

Some time ago a team of doctors conducted an experiment to see the ways in which group pressure influences young people. What they did was they got three cards, each with a different length of line on it: one was an obviously long line, one was a medium-sized line, and one was an obviously short line. They then got ten young people together. Nine of them had been secretly instructed to vote for the second-longest line, the medium-sized line, as being longer than the long line. But there was one student who didn't have a clue what was going on. And that was the person they were conducting the experiment on. What happened was the people conducting the experiment said to the young people, "We want you to vote for the longest line." And the nine students all raised their hands in vote for the card with the medium-length line as the longest line. The tenth student looked round in disbelief! "I can't have heard the instructions right," he concluded, "I must have missed the point." So the directions were explained again. They said, "We want you to vote for the longest line." And again when they held up the medium-sized line, nine hands went up. This time the guy couldn't believe what was happening! But, not wanting to be laughed at, he decided he would just side with the group. And then he kept doing it, voting with the others., each time he was asked. In the end, 75 percent of the young people tested behaved the same way. Time after time, they said that a medium-sized line was longer than the long line. Only 25 percent had the courage to stand against the group. Fact is, no matter whether you are young or old, it takes courage not to conform to the world around us, even if what we're doing we know deep in our hearts is right.

But to tell the truth it's not always the case that what's right, what's true is as clear as it was in this experiment. Sometimes the voices around us *sound* somewhat like what Jesus would say, close enough that we are fooled into thinking it's the real deal. As examples, we might think of sayings like "Be true to yourself," "God helps those who help themselves." and "Charity begins at home." None of these are Biblical, or even Christian, but they're often considered godly advice. And that's the problem, confusing the counterfeit with the real thing. This is especially true when it comes to those who preach health and wealth and promise the secret to living "your

best life now,” as if God’s chief concern is our material success and happiness. Or take those who confuse the gospel with politics. These folks insist that to follow Jesus, to be part of his flock, we must identify with one political party or the other. Jesus cares most about the poor and marginalized, says one group. No, God cares about tradition and family values, says the other. In truth, both sides have good arguments, but following Jesus can never be reduced to promoting a party platform.

The up-shot is, all these voices, all these distractions, these competing messages and false teachers can make it awfully hard to hear God’s voice. They drown out the call of the Shepherd and make it hard to know we are hearing him rightly.

So, what do we do? How can we be sure it’s Jesus’ voice we hear and not another that would lead us astray? How do we distinguish the Shepherd’s voice from all the other voices in our lives?

An answer is suggested by a story I heard recently. One day, a Native American Indian left the reservation where he lived and went to visit a white friend who lived in a city. All the noise of the traffic and the helter-skelter of people rushing here and there was very distracting for the Indian. But as he and his friend were walking down the street, suddenly the Indian stopped and whispered to his friend, “Stand still for a moment. Do you hear what I hear?”

“All I hear are cars and horns and busses and traffic and people. What do you hear?”

“I hear a cricket somewhere nearby chirping.”

His friend stopped and listened very carefully and then shook his head and said, “No way. There are no crickets here. And even if there was, how could you possibly hear it with all the noise on this street?”

The Indian walked ahead a few steps and then stood beside one of those big concrete street planters, moved aside a few leaves and, sure enough, there sat a cricket chirping away. His white friend was astounded.

As the two resumed their stroll, he said, “Naturally you were better able to hear the cricket. You Indians can hear better than we can.”

The Indian smiled and then shook his head, “No, we can’t hear any better than the White man can. Watch and I’ll show you.” He reached into his pocket and took out a 50-cent piece and tossed it onto the pavement. At the sound of the coin hitting on the asphalt, the heads of several passersby turned instantly towards the sound.

The Indian explained to his friend: “It’s not that an Indian can hear better than the White man. It’s that we hear very well the things we are accustomed to pay attention to.”

We hear what we are used to hearing, what we are familiar with, what we are tuned-in to.

What this says to me is that, to distinguish the voice of the Shepherd from all the other voices, all the noise, what we need is to be eminently familiar with what Jesus’ voice sounds like, to be able to recognize the sorts of things that Jesus says. And the only way to do that is to spend time with him. In the Middle East, sheep spend most hours of most days with their shepherd, and as a result they come to know his voice very well. He can walk into a pen of sheep from different flocks, call his sheep and walk out with all whole flock in tow. In the same way, by spending time with our Shepherd, we get to know him, to learn his voice.

This is why it's so important to have a habit of prayer and Scripture study. That might sound trite and unoriginal, but there really is no substitute. We may read newspapers and magazines, listen to the news and keep up with the latest thinking, but none of these can tell us what Jesus thinks, what Jesus wants for us. Only hearing from and talking to him, in Bible study and prayer, can do that. We might add listening to Christian music, traditional hymns or contemporary Christian music, as another way to get attuned to God. When I've been down or going through a difficult time, listening to Christian music, in the car or while working in the yard, has been a huge blessing to me. It helps get God's promises into my heart, not just my head. The point is, if we are not spending time with Jesus, we are likely to miss his call or else mistake the voice of another for the voice of the Shepherd.

Indeed as much as we might wish for a dramatic message from heaven, explaining God's will for us, that's just not how God operates, not usually. More often than not, God speaks through more mundane means, through scripture, through worship, through sermon, through song. God uses these methods to guide us, to encourage us, to lead us to green pastures and still waters. Following the voice of the Shepherd may make us different, sets us apart, as it often means going against the herd. But we know his voice as the voice of one who loves us, who watches over us, over our going out and our coming in, who knows us each by name, who has laid down his life for us that we might have life, abundant life in him. And so if you are ever asked if you hear voices, you can say proudly, "Yes, I hear the voice of the Shepherd, the voice of the Savior, the voice of Jesus," and you can and can take strength, knowing we are the Church of the Good Shepherd. Thanks be to God!