

Hands and Voices

John 10:22-30

The Fourth Sunday of Easter\ Year C
2010

April 25,

O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. AMEN.

The human hand is a strong symbol. It often features as part of corporate and organizational logos. The image of two hands clasped together calls to mind the charitable work of the United Way, while the same two hands open and facing toward us indicates the care and protection offered (at a reasonable price, of course) by the Allstate insurance company. Hallmark greeting cards often include images of people walking hand-in-hand. A child, who should happen to fall and thereby injure himself or herself, will often run to the embracing hands of a parent for comfort. Anyone who has spent time with an extremely ill or dying person knows how critical the touch of a hand can become. A loving caress, a gentle stroke, the massage of soothing cream on cracked skin can do wonders in relieving pain and loneliness. All of these images, and countless others, remind us that hands are a symbol of connectedness, love and hope. This Sunday gospel reading also includes some reassuring words in which a “hand” features prominently. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, declares that “no one will snatch them (or us, as the case may be) out of [his] hand.”

The gospel conveys Jesus’ tender care and concern for those who would follow him, for those whom he declares to be his “sheep.” That said, the attention he gives to the lives of his followers and his deep involvement within those same lives will not keep any of his disciples from the prospect of having to face abuse, distress and even persecution. In fact, Christ’s followers will become targets for the various wolves and coyotes that the world will send their way, just as Christ himself became and remains an object of the world’s malice, a malice which seethes beneath the surface of this morning’s gospel reading.

At first glance, the scene, which Saint John unfolds before us, appears to be an ill-timed oddity. No one, it would seem, has told the gospel writer that we are in the middle of celebrating the season of Easter, a season in which one largely expects to encounter the Resurrected Christ around every corner. Instead, John, presents us with an episode from Jesus’ earthly ministry which, by all accounts, takes place prior to his arrest. He doesn’t even permit us to “stage” this story within, what we would consider an appropriate Easter-like atmosphere. There are no bright flowers, warm breezes, twittering birds and hazy clouds of pollen. Today’s gospel reading takes place in the dead of winter, specifically, at the festival of Hanukkah. There is a chill in the air as frost clings to numerous tree branches. The more skeletal of these limbs appear to grasp the half-light shining dimly from the sun. The Jerusalem Temple is filled with crowds of pilgrims, their foggy breath rising like dampened incense. Their feet tramp upon the hardened ground whose cold severity does nothing to soften the mood. There is

absolutely nothing in the atmosphere of today's gospel reading which is remotely suggestive of Easter, unless, of course, one should happen to be celebrating Easter in the southern hemisphere.

In a recent article, the Anglican priest and theologian, Philip Culbertson, offers us a needed reminder about not only the global nature of Christianity but of our need to reflect deeply upon the ways in which the resurrection can be formational for our lives at particular times and in particular places. He writes that "to experience Eastertide [in New Zealand] as the natural world falls dormant in the autumn is a very different experience from celebrating Easter as the natural world wakes up in the Spring." For New Zealanders, Eastertide is a time of short, darkening days, cold temperatures, fierce winds and unexpected flooding. Easter anticipates the return of light and warmth which is presently far off. The season focuses on the cultivation of faith, particularly the faith necessary to see God's people through a prolonged time of winter darkness. When our experience of Easter is supported by a natural order in sympathy with our deepest held convictions (new life rising from the dead as flowers burst forth from bare branches, for example) our celebration is easy to sustain. If our experience of Easter is, however, contradicted by the natural order, then our celebration will require a firmer commitment, motivated less by the circumstances of the moment than by a distant and yet distinct possibility of hope. This very hope, which is nothing less than the power of the Resurrection operating not only in our lives but beyond our lives, must take form within the dark of those modern-day tombs so common to our experience and within those tomb-like conditions and dying seasons into which our lives often fall, in order for the darkness in question to be overcome. This morning gospel reading, whether intentionally or unintentionally, not only evokes the encroaching darkness which seems to lurk just along the edges of our existence, but also hints at the promised and yet often precarious hope of a springtime waiting to be.

Jesus, himself, bundled against the cold air of winter, strolling in good recreational fashion through the precincts of the Temple, gestures toward the possibility of an approaching spring for God's people. He walks among the great pillars which compose the enormous portico erected by King Solomon. His leisurely progress is interrupted, however, by those whom Saint John calls "Jews." The "Jews," in the parlance of the gospel writer, are simply those persons who are opposed to Jesus. John, at no point in time, intends to make an ethnic or racial slur whose target is the Jewish people, so neither should we. Christ's opponents surround him like a pack of ravenous wolves bent on inspecting their prey. They have come prepared for a fight. Their ammunition consists of loaded questions and biting statements. "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah tell us plainly" they ask Jesus. At first glance, their question appears to anticipate a positive answer. In other words, the "Jews" seem not only excited about, but receptive to, the possibility of Jesus' declaring himself to be the Messiah. Unfortunately, appearances can often be deceiving. The reality of the situation is that Christ's opponents are viciously unhappy. In truth, they are neither hopeful nor curious about Jesus' possible Messiah-ship. The suspense, in which Christ is said to be holding them, is non-existent. Despite our scriptural translations which render his opponents question as "How long will you keep us in suspense," a better

translation is “How long do you intend to provoke us?” Christ is an irritant. His presence brings out the worst in them. Their question is a brilliantly calculated trap. If they can goad Jesus into declaring himself to be the “Messiah,” they will be able to charge him with blasphemy. To manipulate him into such an admission within the sacred precincts of the Temple is merely icing on their cake.

Christ's response is not only equally brilliant but also equally calculated, if not a bit convoluted. Christ never comes right out and says that he is the Messiah. Instead, he replies: “I answered your question already but you don't believe. Everything I have done has been authorized by my Father. My works testify to me. You don't believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep recognize my voice. I know them and they follow me.” His response is a poignant reminder that for some people, words will always fail to muster any persuasive power regardless of how clearly He or his Church may speak them. While Christ can tell us plainly all he wishes to tell us, there will be those for whom what he says will have no effect. The hardness of the human heart is often difficult to work around. He does, however, hold open the possibility that those who would discount his words, may be unable to discount his actions. In other words, we can know Christ, even understand who he is, albeit imperfectly, by what he does. His great work, of course, is nothing less than his dying and rising and it points toward his identity and to our salvation. That said, there are people who will, when the world is all said and done, still discount even his greatest work. They will find his sacrifice unpersuasive, even an empty tomb will be unsatisfying.

Though Christ's answer to his opponents is somewhat mystifying; his opponents' ultimate reaction, on the other hand, is illuminating. Upon hearing our Lord's, admittedly, strange talk of shepherds and sheep, the Jews declare him to be “demon-possessed.” In the ancient world, to label someone as being under demonic influence was an easy way to destroy the accused person's honor and to cast them out from the community. Christ's opponents, it would seem, are determined to find him delusional for such a declaration is the only means left to them, by which, they can render Christ effectively voiceless. After all, no one pays much attention to people who are deemed crazy or mentally compromised. Ironically, despite the straight jacket into which they attempt to put him, Christ will still get the last laugh. They may try to silence the Good Shepherd by marginalizing him, by exiling him back to that place from whence he came, but they forget that it is among the verdant fields, at the edges of proper society, that one will often find the sheep most in need of a shepherd. And the sheep, despite the best efforts of Christ's opponents, will still hear his voice. In fact, Christ will train his sheep, disciple them really, so that they can hear and recognize what he is saying. His voice will not be the easily ignored tinkling of a bell worn by the lead sheep put out to pasture, but a word spoken and embodied in the very way he lived, taught and journeyed through death into risen life. Our task is to follow him and to rest in the assurance of his deep, abiding care and in the promise of eternal life. This assurance comes to us as we live into our own baptismal identity and out of the personal relationship which God offers us.

The Good Shepherd speak his living word to us in many ways. Each Sunday, when we gather for worship, we hear his living word in our scripture readings, in our prayers and hymns, hopefully, even within the sermons preached. We need only open our hearts, minds and bodies to what he says in order for him to lead us. Should we listen intently, we will be able to hear the living word of the Good Shepherd within our faith community as we both experience and share the demands of discipleship. We will hear Christ's powerful word within those voices which challenge us, within those voices which speak prophetically in their demand for acts of justice and mercy in our daily living. The Good Shepherd's voice echoes forth within the cries of the poor and within the tearful pleas of those who are suffering. His words offer us all the assurance we need, for even when his voice leads us beyond those realms we find safe and secure, his hand will still hold us tight. His hand will lead us to new life and come heaven, hell or high water, never let us go.