

Beyond Easter, Pt.3
Knowing The Voice: John 10.1-10

By Major Brian Coles

[slide 1, blank] Tom Long tells the story of how a dinner party had gone very well. The good food was matched by enriching conversation.

As the dishes were being cleared and the cream was being stirred into after-dinner coffee, the conversation took a more serious turn.

The guest of honour was a church leader from central Europe, communism had collapsed only months before, and the guests were filled with eager questions.

How had the church in his country fared during the long years of communist oppression?

What changes were occurring now that the fresh winds of democracy were blowing across central Europe?

What wisdom did his experience bring for the church in North America?

He spoke slowly, evenly cautiously at first, measuring his words carefully as he was among relative strangers.

Gradually gaining confidence, he spoke of dramatic shifts in the social and political climate of his region,

and of the church made strong through hardship and persecution.

Then, with an eye cast toward the North American religious scene, he observed that possibly the greatest threat to the church in his own land

was the temptation to relax its guard in the new atmosphere of freedom,

that the church could lose its sense of calling by falling into an easy alliance with a seemingly friendlier culture.

He told of how, under a totalitarian regime, the church was officially tolerated but always undermined and repressed,

how clergy were always monitored by secret agents who had infiltrated their ranks.

“We would have a meeting about some matter of church business,” he said,

“knowing for certain that not everyone seated at the table could be trusted; some of the ‘ministers’ present were, in fact, government agents.”

He paused for a moment and then added, “But even though these government spies were careful never to betray their true identities, we could always tell who they were.”

“But how?” someone asked. “The voice,” he replied, “The voice. Something in their voices would give them away.

The voice. The words may have been smooth and well-chosen, but there was something in the sound of the voice that disclosed the agent of deception, the wolf in sheep’s clothing.

There was something in the voice that revealed the distinction between the true and the false, between the dependable and the treacherous.

“Something in their voices,” he said, “would give them away.”

In a similar way, Jesus himself said that his own followers could divide the trustworthy from the untrustworthy by the sound of a voice.

[slide 2] John records these words of Jesus in the 10th chapter of his gospel, beginning at vs.5.

“But they (the sheep) will never follow a stranger,” he said, “because they do not recognize (or know) a stranger’s voice.”

Rather, he says in vs.4, “the sheep follow (the shepherd) because they know his voice.”

Because they belong to Jesus, the good shepherd, they respond faithfully to his voice alone.

[slide 3, blank] What is it about a voice that signals trust? What is there about Jesus’ voice that causes his own to follow him?

The world is cluttered with voices competing for our attention. A cacophony of voices shouts for our loyalty, urges us to get into step and become followers of this or that cause:

“Support the fight against global poverty,” “Support the fight against racism,” as so on and so forth.

Jesus’ voice may sometimes be heard *above* these clamoring voices, and may even be heard *in* some of them,

but Jesus claims that his followers will surely know his voice when they hear it,

that they will be able to distinguish his clear and true call from the false tones of strangers.

But what makes this so? What is there about Jesus’ voice that is unmistakable to his followers?

Part of it is familiarity. Even a young child, laying in the crib, surrounded by the whispering voices of adoring relatives,

turns and brightens at the sound of the one voice most familiar, the one voice most trusted, the intimate voice of the mother.

Or even when two people met, seemingly for the first time. They are cautious, wary, as strangers are at an initial encounter.

But then one says, "Hey, how ya' doing," and there is a flicker of recognition. "Is that you?" exclaims the other. "Is that really you?"

How many years has it been? I didn't recognize you at first, but when I heard your voice..."

[slide 4] As Jesus' followers, we can recognize his voice because his voice is familiar.

Look again at vs.4, "...his sheep follow him because they know his voice."

We discern its distinctive sound; we remember its reassuring tone.

Over and over again, in times of distress and upset, when we have not been sure we could take one more step, he has spoken words of comfort to us.

Here are some examples. In Jn. 14.27 Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you...do not be afraid.

When our faith has faltered and our sight grown dim, he has reassured us in Jn. 14.1,

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me."

When we are uncertain about life's purpose, confused about what makes life worth the living, he calls us anew, saying in Jn. 15.12,

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

Even when they stand at the entrance of death's door, staring with grief into its dark depths, over and over he has spoken to us of hope in Jn. 11.25,

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live."

At every bend in the road, in every predicament along the way, we hear his familiar words; we know his voice.

All the days of our lives he has been our good shepherd, and we know his voice. It is familiar to us.

In the flurry of voices that fill the world today, we, as followers of Jesus, listen for the sound of the voice we are familiar with; the one we know best,

the voice that speaks compassionately, mercifully, lovingly, and hopefully.

And when we hear his familiar voice, we follow him; we do not respond to the voice of strangers; the uncaring voices of bitterness and judgement, of hatred and strife.

But it is more than familiarity that causes us to recognize his voice.

[slide 5] As Jesus' followers recognize his voice because his voice is personal and authoritative.

Jesus speaks to us personally and with authority. Look at vs. 3, "He calls his own sheep by *name* and *leads* them out."

The voice of Jesus is not spoken over a public address system, making a vague, general announcement for all to hear.

The voice of Jesus speaks to each one of us personally, calling each of us by name, summoning each one of us to follow him.

Not long ago, a church put on a play a week before X'mas. It was a production of Charles Dicken's classic *A Christmas Carol*.

The church gym was transformed into a theater. The chairs were clustered around the tables all facing the makeshift stage

fitted with painted backdrops of the tenement housing and sooty chimneys of 19th C. London.

When the audience gathered and were handed their programs, some were amused to note that the part of the tight-fisted Ebenezer Scrooge

was being played by the church Treasurer, a gentle man who was very generous.

They were impressed, though, by the skill and energy he brought to his part.

He growled his way through the opening scenes, ringing out "Bah! Humbug!" and shivered with fright as he encountered the 3 spirits of Christmas.

The final scene called for a transformed and jubilant Scrooge to greet the light of Christmas day by flinging open his bedroom window

and shouting out to the startled city street below, "Meery Christmas, everyone! Meery Christmas!"

Then Scrooge, wishing to bestow Christmas cheers upon the needy of London and looking for someone to help dispense his cheer, acted as if he had spied a small boy passing by.

“Hey, you, boy, you there!” the joyful Scrooge shouted, pointing vigorously at this imaginary figure.

“Come up here, boy. I’ve got something wonderful for you to do!”

At that moment something unexpected happened. When the cheerful and transformed Scrooge

beckoned from the window “Come up here, boy. I’ve got something wonderful for you to do,”

a six-year-old boy in the audience, seated with his family, who were members of the congregation,

spontaneously rose from his chair in response to Scrooge’s call and walked on stage, ready to “do something wonderful.”

The actor playing Scrooge blinked in disbelief. There was now an unscripted child from the audience standing on center stage. What to do?

The audience held its collective breath. Then the man playing Scrooge took charge.

Bounding down from his window perch, he strode across the stage and cheerily embraced the waiting boy.

“Yes, indeed,” he exclaimed, “You are the one, the very one I had in mind.”

Then he gently led the boy back to his seat in the audience, returned to the stage and resumed the play.

When the curtain calls were held, it was, of course, this boy, the one who had felt personally summoned from his seat,

who received, along with old Ebenezer himself, the audience's loudest and warmest applause.

So it is that the sheep hear and know the voice of the good shepherd.

We know the voice of our good shepherd. It is a familiar voice and a personal voice; a voice which calls each of us by name.

And he calls each one of us to follow him and to do something wonderful for him.

When we get up out of our seats and bound up to the stage ready to follow,

the good shepherd himself embraces us and says, "Yes, yes, you are the one, the very one I had in mind."

Let's sing, "By His Hand [645 / 8 P] CS 57 "Where he leads me, I will follow" [if needed].