

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Sunday, April 17, 2016, Year C

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: John 10:22-30

"Real Recognition"

Nowadays when you make a phone call to just about any company – the technology that allows you to say your account number or to simply say what service you are looking for from that company is amazing. I was truly blessed to be one of the people who were involved with Bell Labs in Columbus, Ohio, in developing speech recognition over the telephone. After teaching Voice Response technology for AT&T in New York, in 1994 I was brought down to Jacksonville, Florida to join a remarkable team – who used this cutting edge technology on every single phone call that came into AT&T Universal Card. I could go on for hours (but I won't) about how the spoken phrase is broken down to the smallest sound – called a phoneme – and then matched against a database of words, account numbers, mother's maiden name, "I want to speak with someone," "representative" or whatever you could imagine. I was really blessed to be teamed up with some of the most gifted and talented people – as we took a concept of speech recognition and made it a reality – that today has become an expected norm in industry. People wonder why a company would do this; are they trying to aggravate people? You have to understand that it costs a company about \$.08 to process a call through the computer and give you your account balance or the information you are looking for, getting a duplicate statement – all of those things. If you get to a representative it costs about \$3.00, because that representative has a salary, overhead, benefits; and so on. That is just to tell you why we did. If you had an AT&T Universal Card from 1994 to 2002, if you called you heard my voice saying "Welcome to AT&T Universal Card. Please touchtone or speak your sixteen digit account number now." I was on millions of calls giving people bad news, or good news. It was all about recognizing what the people wanted, or should I say what they needed rather than what they wanted.

Today's Holy Gospel lets us recognize Jesus as the Son of God, the Good Shepherd, and then assures us that Jesus and the Father are one. Today, we see who Jesus is beyond the resurrection, we see Him in reality as the True Son of God.

Jesus is walking in the "colonnade or portico of Solomon" of the Temple in Jerusalem. It was a cold day, and it was Hanukah. It was winter, which meant for Jerusalem a raw, cold wind blew in from the east – possibly even accompanied by snow. It does snow in Jerusalem. You might not realize that – but it is located on a mountain. Jesus was walking in the part of the Temple that was enclosed and so it sheltered Him from that windy, cold weather. As He walked, prayed and meditated, a group of Jews, or Judeans, came to Him and asked Him, "*How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.*" These people are desperately longing for someone to save them from the horrible conditions in which they live – under the thumb of Rome. They are anxious and the "not too distant memory" is all too real. The feast that they are celebrating – the Feast of Dedication, which is also known as the Feast of the Maccabees – or Hanukah, reminds them of the rededication of the Temple after it had been desecrated during the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes, emperor of the Greco Syrian Empire in 168 BC. They want a deliverer and they want him now, and so they pump Jesus for

answers.

Jesus answered them, *"I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand."* Standing right there in front of them is the Christ, the Messiah – and they are just not getting it! Jesus even comes right out tells the Jews that He is the Christ, the Messiah. He tells them that He has told them over and over again who He is, but they just will not believe. Talk about a stubborn, stiff necked people! That is what God called them in the Bible. He speaks, but they do not hear. There is no Speech Recognition!

Jesus wants us to hear His words; He wants us to understand who He is in our lives. He wants us to know and believe that He is our shepherd and we are His sheep. He wants us to follow His voice; He wants us to hear His words of peace and comfort for our lives. But sometimes you and I have a difficult time hearing.

Let me share with you some background about shepherds in the time of Jesus. They did not walk after the flock, they did not have dogs to help them; it was the shepherd and the flock. A shepherd would call his flock and they would walk behind him. He would lead them wherever they went - like sheep! Sheep follow their master; they would not follow anyone else's voice.

One of the things Jesus is asking us to understand about Him as our Shepherd and as our risen Christ is that we need to hear His voice and follow it in this world. Though we might have a difficult time hearing His voice and though there are times as if it might seem that we are deaf to His voice, Jesus is reminding us that He really wants to be patient with us, He wants a bond of trust and understanding between us so that we can hear His voice, so that we can trust in Him so that we will know He wants what is best for us – and we can follow where He leads.

Isn't it true that we can be too easily distracted in the rush of this modern world?

- Maybe we aren't deaf to the words of Jesus,
- maybe we don't have a hearing problem as much as we hear what we want to hear and we tune out Jesus and tune in on all of the others sounds and words of the world as it rushes by.
- Maybe part of our problem is we don't have a trusting relationship with Him to listen intently to His words.
- And maybe we only listen to what we want to listen to, and far too much of our listening is centered on the world and not enough is on Jesus. We tune Him out instead of focusing our attention on Him.

It reminds me of the two men who were walking along a crowded city sidewalk. Suddenly, one of the men said, "What a lovely sound that cricket is making," but the other man didn't hear the cricket. He asked his friend how he could hear the cricket with the roar of the traffic and the

sound of the people. The first man, who was a zoologist, had trained himself to hear the sounds of nature. He didn't explain to his friend how he could hear the sound of the cricket, but instead, he reached into his pocket, pulled out a fifty cent piece, dropped it onto the sidewalk, and watched intently as dozens of people began to look for the coin as they heard it clanking around in spite of the sounds of the traffic and the sounds of the crowded city. He turned to his friend and said, "**We hear what we listen for.**" Isn't that true?

About 18 years ago, when our son John Eric was much younger, and we worshipped at Church of the Redeemer in Jacksonville – I was asked to help my friend, the music leader named Paul, with a unique children's sermon. I was in the sacristy with a microphone, while Paul, who was giving the sermon, spoke directly to the children in the sanctuary of the church. It was about today's Gospel – and Paul would announce that a voice was about to come – and they had to identify who the character was. In my radio career I was blessed to do a lot of voice impressions and so Paul wanted me to have some fun with the children. First I gave them Donald Duck – and they got it immediately; next was Barney the Dinosaur – and they got that right away too; and last was Mickey Mouse – and they all said "Mickey" – except John Eric who loudly proclaimed "that's my Daddy!" So when Paul asked him why he said that, John answered "I would know my Daddy's voice anywhere!" Funny thing was – we didn't even tell him to say that – we had a lot more planned – but that was enough – John made the whole point! Sermon was done.

The Jews heard, but did not believe. They saw Jesus' signs and miracles, but did not get His message. We have heard His words down through the centuries through the Bible, through preaching, through the sacrament, that Jesus is the Christ, the risen Lord. We have seen His deeds as His Holy Spirit has worked in the lives of countless people, relieving them of illnesses, of cancer, but still some don't believe, still some have a difficult time centering their attention, their focus on this Shepherd who would guide the lives of His people, His sheep. How truly blessed we are to have an advantage over the Jews of Jesus' time, we have the whole story - from Genesis to Revelation – all sixty six books of the Bible! We have seen in the Holy Scriptures the witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In each of the last three Sundays, we have seen a powerful witness that without a doubt, Jesus has risen from the dead. Many leaders throughout the years have died and are still in their tombs. Our leader, our Savior, our God, walked out of His! So we should be able to trust in Him, to follow Him, to believe in His Lordship for our lives with greater conviction than the Jews, the Judeans, who approached Jesus in the temple.

- But sadly, many people still doubt,
- Many people still do not trust Jesus as their savior and Lord.
- Many people are still looking, and still searching for the meaning and purpose to their lives.
- Many have found no one to help them with the burdens they carry. They are still wandering, without any direction, with no goal, absolutely no idea what to make of their life, and what they want to accomplish with the God given gifts and talents that have

been so generously given to them.

The key to hearing Jesus' voice is to let Him have control. Give Him permission in your life; surrender to Him so that He can be your Good Shepherd; so that He can take care of you by:

- giving you guidance,
- giving you peace,
- giving you a sense of worth and direction.

The reaction by the Jews in the Temple was not one of recognition, of welcoming, or acceptance, but instead as the Gospel of John tells us in the words immediately following today's Holy Gospel reading – "*Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?"*" (John 10:31-32) There was absolutely no gratitude for the healings, the miracles or the lessons that He taught them. Instead they wanted to kill Jesus!

What about the many people on this earth that have not heard the voice of Jesus or, God forgive them, have outwardly rejected His message or even rejected Him personally? Jesus tells us of His intentions just moments before today's Gospel revealing His plan for the world, saying "*I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me-- just as the Father knows me and I know the Father--and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.*" (John 10:14-16) Jesus' plan of salvation is not just for the people of Israel but for the Gentiles as well – "*If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.*" (Mark 7:16) Jesus' invitation is to the whole world – but sadly there will be those who refuse – who pick up the stones to throw. We need to pray for them – pray that their hearts would be changed – that their ears would be opened – and that they would open the doors of their hearts to Christ. It is a matter of life and death – **their eternal life and death!**

So I ask you today: do you have ears to hear Him in your life? Are you listening? Or are you doing all the talking?

Jesus went to the cross so that each one of us may have forgiveness of our sins, so that each one of us can, in spite of our unworthiness, seek Him and invite Him into our lives. Today is the perfect day to begin a relationship with Jesus as Lord of your life, as your Good Shepherd. Please give Him permission today and receive a special kind of speech recognition – recognition of His voice. Jesus says, "*My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.*" (John 10:27-28)