

The Voice of the Lord

The fourth Sunday of Easter is also called Good Shepherd Sunday. The Gospel readings for each of the three liturgical years (A, B, and C), stress Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The Gospel for the third year of the three year cycle includes, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me." (John 10:27).

In a near-death experience you may hear God's voice while in his presence. God communicates telepathically. While a lot may be said before the presence of God, those who experience a near-death encounter, usually remember two phrases while standing before the presence of God. The first is, "I will protect you." The second, "You must justify your soul." You do not hear a sound like we humans hear, rather, God's voice is communicated to us via thought. It is a knowing, a sensing, but a definite, clear communication. When we return from a near-death experience the "impressions" can be sensed throughout one's life through the Holy Spirit.

You stand before God in this near-death experience bathed in light, ecstatic in glory and full of peace. You have the fullness of joy in God's presence. That is, you have joyful bliss. God's message about protection is meant for everyone. God is your shepherd and he will bring you safely to eternal life. He is protecting all of us.

As you sense God speaking to you, you become aware of Jesus' arm on your shoulder and around your neck! You cannot see this but you feel his arm and you are very aware of who it is. You may also sense Jesus' radiant smile. While you are beaming you become aware that Jesus is radiant. Jesus taught about the joy of heaven when someone lost is found, and through a near-death experience, there is ethereal (heavenly or celestial) jubilation. Imagine: The Lord of Lords and King of the universe is also a friend willing to hug us! It's an experience that one never forgets.



Throughout Scripture, the arm of the Lord is talked about. Mostly, the arm of the Lord has to do with his salvation power. It also has to do with his tender love. Isaiah 40:10–11 is a good example of both: Behold, the Lord comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd, He will gather the lambs in his arms, He will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

His word of protection means that God will always be with you. In your journey through the mystery of life, you are never alone. You are conscious of his closeness and companionship. Secondly, protection does not mean that you will never suffer, but that you will be protected from losing your soul. God's promise of protection refers to eternal life. It means that you are saved. It means that you always belong to Him. You are his possession. You are one of the sheep of His flock. Evil will never take you away from Jesus. These words of Jesus are meant for all of us.

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand." (John 10:27–28).

Providential Protection

Jesus works through circumstances, people, coincidences, and even angels to help his flock. Jesus protects us in many instances. God does not always protect us from suffering the trials of life, but he brings us through them. As you review your own life or family history, you may become aware of the mystery of Divine Providence and protection. If there is some tragedy that occurs either in your own life, or to others that you may read about, you wonder where is God's protection in the lives of those suffering from a tragedy? That is a question we simply cannot answer this side of heaven. Why does God protect in some cases and allow terrible things in other cases? It is a mystery. Even though we do not understand everything, we can still believe that God is our protector. God is watching over us. He is our shepherd and evil will never snatch us out of his hands.

The apostle Paul is a good example and inspiration concerning divine providence and protection. He journeyed to many places proclaiming Jesus. He founded new churches, built up existing churches, and wrote a good portion of the New Testament. He lived a life of excellence, integrity and discipline. Although the Lord was with him, he still suffered and eventually was martyred. June 29th is his feast day, shared with St. Peter. The second reading for the feast of Saints Peter and Paul comes from 2 Timothy. It talks about how Paul had lived a life of fire and passion for Jesus. He had kept the goal before him and lived God's will. He had total confidence in God's protection in his life. Paul was a man who knew his end was near, but still trusted in God's providence.

For I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord will award to me on that Day...

The Lord stood by me and gave me strength to proclaim the message fully, that all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To God be the glory for ever and ever. Amen. (2 Timothy 4:6–8, 17–18).

Jesus comforts us with these words, "Even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not." (Luke 12:7). No matter what happens to us, we can trust in God's providence to bring us safely home. God's protection does not preserve us from dying, but he will bring us through death to new life.

If Today You Hear God's Voice, Harden Not Your Heart

In your near-death experience, the first message that the Lord may convey to you and, which offers you comfort, is the message, "I will protect you." The second and final communication may be: "You must justify your soul." As you stand before God, and "hear" this message you begin to "feel" the meaning of these words. You understand that you are not right before God and need time to change.

As you are filled with love and glory in God's presence, you may also have a major source of discomfort within you. In a near-death experience, you feel naked before God. You are exposed, light is penetrating you and there is no way to hide. You are judging yourself, and you don't feel right (justified) before God. This is why you may not want to go through the tunnel in the first place! You know you're not ready to stand before God. Psalm 90:8 says, "You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your face." Your conscience and state of soul before God may not be right and you know it. It also may be the major reason God brings you before him in a near-death experience. In his mercy, he is showing you the wanting state of 2

your soul and giving you time to change. Besides revealing the truth of his presence, and the reality of his love, this near-death experience is also a warning.

The Catholic Catechism #1022 informs us that at the moment of our death, each of us will encounter a "particular judgment." This individualized judgment will determine our eternal destiny. As you stand before God, your life will be reviewed. This is the particular judgment that we all face. In a near-death experience it is something that you never forget. This feeling of lack and discomfort before God, as well as experiencing God's love radically changes your life, so that when death arrives you can be justified.

Those who have a near-death experience, need it because their soul is wanting and need something traumatic in order to turn their life around. People will often say, "How can a loving God send people to hell?" What you discover is that God doesn't send anyone to hell; rather, we judge ourselves. All of our secrets, all of our motivations, all of our deeds and all of our thoughts will be laid bare before God. No one can hide from this luminous scrutiny. God's light will penetrate us and we will know how we stand and who we are before God. St. Paul knew of the coming self-judgment when he wrote, "What the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of people by Christ Jesus." (Romans 2:15–16).

The theology of John's Gospel also upholds this type of self-judgment. His gospel has what is called a "realized eschatology." What that means is that the truths having to do with the final days are, in John's view, already being realized. An example of what that means is the concept of eternal life. Rather than eternal life being something only for the hereafter, this life is presented as something for the here and now. In the Gospel of John, it is a new quality of life through the Holy Spirit, as well as something that will continue into the future and last forever.

In regards to judgment, there will be the judgment on the last day (John 12:48), but there is also the present reality of the judgment. It occurs each day of our lives. How we live, the choices we make and the deeds we do or don't do now is the judgment. It is best explained in these words of Jesus, "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil." (John 3:19). In a very real way, today is your judgment day! When it comes to the judgment, eternity is now. Your choices in life and your deeds determine your eternal destiny. Either you will turn your will over to God or live selfishly.

The Scriptures teach us that after Adam fell he hid himself from God because he felt naked, ashamed and afraid. (Genesis 3:8). Notice, God had not judged him, Adam judged himself and felt unworthy of the Lord because of what he had done. Then God asked, "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9). Of course God knew his location, but he was asking Adam a deeper question. What God was asking was, "Where are you before me? What is the state of your soul?" The writer of Genesis is posing that question for all of us to consider. Adam wanted to hide because of his disobedience. He was naked in the light of God's awesome presence. He was found out.

This feeling of unworthiness, is one of the meanings of the often misunderstood term, "the fear of the Lord." It is the fear of being judged and condemned. The greatest fear we should have is to stand before God and be found wanting. To stand before God knowing you are not right inspires great fear. This holy fear can help motivate us to change our behavior and become right before God. Paul the Apostle stated, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he

has done in the body. Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade people." (2 Corinthians 5:10–11. This fear of the Lord should not be the motivating factor in determining our behavior but it should influence our behavior.

Who Are You Really?

As you stand before God in a near-death experience, you experience a life review. All your deeds are immediately clear. As you stand there before God's majesty and see his beauty, love and perfection, you understand how severely lacking you are, and that God is acutely aware of it. If you have lived selfishly and developed little virtue, in a flash, your life is simply made bare. There is no hiding, no pretending, and no putting on. There are no excuses to make things right. All is clear. You become keenly aware that you are incomplete.

Our deeds are displayed in our heart. If life revolves around you, and everything is about you, you understand that you are very selfish, narcissistic and stingy. You use people and love things to find happiness. If the great American dream is your goal, you concentrate on how to make a lot of money and lead a comfortable life. Accumulating possessions and living the good life becomes your goal. You may have a number of relationships that end up with hurt and separation. You shut the God of your childhood out of your life because of your attachment to the world and its pleasures. Your heart becomes hard and full of doubt. After a while, you delude yourself thinking, "I don't hurt anyone. I'm a good person."

You may experience a reflection on the way you are living (your conscience speaking to you). You begin to question God interiorly. Instinctively, if you begin to live a reckless life, you justify your own behavior to yourself. (2 Corinthians 10:5). This happens with everyone. Consciously you remember thinking to yourself, "I may not be living right, but what are the chances there really is a God anyway?" The truth can be found in two Psalms, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" (Psalm 14:1). And, "Sin speaks to the wicked deep in his heart; there is no fear of God before his eyes." (Psalm 36:1). You are listening to the voice of sin and have grown hard of heart.

The opposite of love is not hate. The opposite of love is selfishness. Love is generous and cares. Selfishness is stingy and cares only for itself. When God tells you that you are not justified in your soul, you understand that the purpose of your life is the journey from selfishness to selflessness. Mother Teresa said, "At the end of our life we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made, how many great things we have done. We will be judged by 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat. I was naked and you clothed me. I was homeless and you took me in.'" God wants us to be interested in the welfare of others and to love.

What God is looking for is love. Jesus taught the religious leaders of his day the same thing. They were complaining because Jesus was eating with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus told them, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" (Matthew 9:13).

A perennial problem in our churches is lack of involvement. Most people go to Mass or services and feel attending is enough. They have participated in ritual, giving something in the offering and said some prayers. God makes it clear time after time in the Scriptures that participation in ritual is not enough. For example, Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. (Luke 10:29–37). A man was stripped and beaten and left for dead by the side of the road. A priest was going up the road and saw him and moved to the other side of the road. A Levite (a born priest) also moved to the other side. (By the way, they were traveling up the hill toward Jerusalem and we can infer that they are going there to offer sacrifice). It was a foreigner, the Samaritan, who

stopped to offer aid. Through the medium of a story Jesus is asking, "Who is the truly holy person, the one who offers ritual sacrifice or the one who sacrifices his time and money for a person in need?"

Religion = Reaching Out

True religion is not just about only ritual, it is about reaching out. It is easy to go to church week after week, hear the Word of God proclaimed, and yet not respond by getting involved. Participating in the Mass is not enough. You have to make some kind of move to help people. "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction." (James 1:27). Your faith requires that you become involved in some way. Religion is all about your relationship with God and with people. You cannot do everything but you can do something. Mass is a beginning, not an end in itself. At the conclusion of Mass there is the proclamation of the great commission, "Go in peace glorifying the Lord by your life."

Strengthened by prayer and the body and blood of Christ, we are to go, not stay put, and close in on ourselves. In the story of the rich man and the poor beggar named Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31), we read about the rich man who had ample opportunity to help Lazarus "at his gate," but he never did. Both died and there was a great reversal. Suddenly the first became last and the last first. Lazarus enjoyed heaven while the rich man cried out in lament and regret. Let God's Word speak to you and penetrate you. Do not deny what you are hearing and go through life without acting on the Word of God.

God is calling us to help other people. Try to inspire people to reach out to the needy "at their gates." There are many ways to get involved in helping the poor and hungry. You can make a difference. Reaching out is true religion. Jesus taught often about being rich in God's eyes, to "lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven." (Matthew 6:19–21). Was Jesus talking here not only about our personal relationship with God but also to reach out to other people with our time, talents and finances? This is what truly makes us rich! St. Lawrence, a deacon and martyr who lived in the third century, was ordered by his Roman captors to "bring out the treasures of the church and place it before them." St. Lawrence gathered all the poor and the lame, brought them out and said, "These people are the treasures of the church." Those sly words would get him martyred.

If you believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior, be quick to forgive and to give. Then, you will be justified through your faith in Jesus and your actions. There is no such thing as "private religion." If you want to follow Christ, you must deny yourself and take up your cross of obedience daily. Reaching out to others can be a sacrifice at times, but it is very rewarding. Helping people is the meaning of life and is the hallmark of love. When you reach out to others you take your mind off yourself and your problems and end up being radically blessed!

When you focus on yourself and close your heart to compassion, you freeze. Life has little meaning and you are caught up in yourself and your problems. It is easy to get caught up in the petty little things of life and be frustrated. However, when you make the decision to reach out to others and help them, while it may be difficult, it keeps you alive. It becomes a blessing to you.

Choose to Love

Love is a multifaceted gem. First of all, psychologists tell us that love is a decision. They are right. In the realm of the will, it is the choice to reach out to another, to help another and to forgive. Love must not be an isolated choice once in a while. It must be a series of great choices over and over again. It must override what you sometimes feel. If we allow our feelings to dictate our actions, nothing would ever get done. The will is

stronger than our emotions. These great choices become an attitude and attitudes lead a person to become a person of character. Love is a summation of quality decisions that steers the path of your life.

Love is also affection. It is heartfelt care. You must grow to be a person who cares for others. True care will move you to reach out. In the story of the Good Samaritan, it was the Samaritan's compassion that moved him to help. Jesus taught and fed people because he was moved with compassion. (Mark 6:34).

Mature followers of Jesus are those who genuinely like and care for others and follow a well-formed conscience. They do the right thing even when the wrong thing is happening to them. They do the right thing because it is right even though there seems to be no immediate reward or pleasure. They do the right thing even when no one is watching. They are motivated to help others.

St. Paul the Apostle wrote a stirring letter to the churches of Galatia. His letter had to do with freedom from the laws of Moses and liberty in Christ. He talked a lot about how Jesus had come to make us right with God through faith. "For freedom Christ has set us free." (Galatians 5:1). The law, rules and regulations, no longer bind us. Our faith in Jesus justifies us. The crucial verse is, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision or uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith made effective through love." (Galatians 5:6).

In other words, Paul was saying that the heart of Christianity is not obedience to a set of laws; rather, it is faith in the person of Jesus. Our faith is not an intellectual assent to a doctrine, but belief in and commitment to a person, Jesus. What makes our faith live is love. Love is the wind that drives the sails of faith. Love activates faith. Faith alone is dead. We must do the good works which are the fruit of our faith. God is love and we must become love.

In a near-death experience, if you are selfish, you will understand that you will have little to show for your life. You will learn that you cannot be filled with God's love and glory as fully as you need to be. When Jesus spoke about "the greatest or least in the Kingdom of Heaven" was he referring to those who are the greatest because of their capacity to love, they will be able to receive more of God? The least will be those still worthy of life, but whose capacity to receive God will be less.

As you are penetrated by the glory of God in a near-death experience, you feel within yourself the inability to receive fully and enjoy more intensely because of what is lacking in your soul. This causes anguish and distress. You understand that the Lord is teaching you in that moment your need to grow. You understand that the purpose of life is to mature into a person of love. The purpose of our life on earth is to journey from selfishness to selflessness. Be a giver. Be quick to forgive. Try to see the best side of people. This sanctification and growth occurs through the purification process. Be purified of selfishness, cynicism and negativity. The meaning of human existence is love. As we grow in love now, our capacity to receive God now as well as later will expand. Our hearts are elastic and have the capacity to expand as we push ourselves to reach out.

Our Call to Love

Jesus taught about love all the time. "By this will all know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another." (John 13:35). The centerpiece of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount was, "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:48). Many incorrectly interpret Jesus' words as setting an impossible standard of utter and complete perfection. Rather, the word perfection in the Greek has to do with a goal and achieving maturity, becoming complete. This comment follows Jesus' teaching about

loving even enemies. Therefore, what Jesus was really teaching was that the goal or purpose of our life is to mature in love and have love as our goal. We must strive to be God-like.

When two people enter into the sacrament of matrimony to become one person, it is this "becoming" that God is interested in. Selfishness melts into the selflessness of given one's body to the other even when you don't feel like it. You become one when you apologize for hurting the other and admit you are wrong. You grow in love when you give even when you feel your spouse isn't reciprocating. You mature when you forgive seventy times seven. You come to perfection in the trials and difficulties and joys of creating and raising children. Submitting to each other is never easy, but makes each person grow. Life is about being stretched.

Single life too, is a vocation and a call to love. Certainly being there for your family is important, but you must extend yourself beyond your nuclear family. You do this by getting involved in the community. Reaching out to those who have less and making a difference in their lives is important. Spreading the Gospel by the way you live and speak is your call. Achieving excellence and moral integrity by your choices in life is your vocation.

Whatever your vocation is in life, your call is to love. As we submit and surrender to God through the circumstances in which we find ourselves, he will ripen the wonderful fruit of love in us. The extent to which we live with passion, learn, and grow in love now will determine our capacity to receive love when we stand before the majesty of love itself.

Loving others is one very real way of reciprocating God's love for us. When we stand before God and especially after having a near-death experience you want to receive his love fully and be great in the Kingdom of Heaven!

Thy Will Be Done: Prayer for God's Will, Not Mine

O Lord, my Heavenly Father, I praise your holy name. I pray for your will to be done in my life and in this world, for your way to rule here on earth as it does in heaven. I'm not in control, Lord, you are, even though that's often hard for me to admit and accept. I'm releasing what comes next into your hands, O Lord, and trusting you fully. I want to step into whatever path you lay before me, even when it looks different from what I thought I wanted. For I know you have bigger plans for my life, so I submit my life to your will. I will trust and obey you with an eager and joyful heart. Father, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Story About: God's Plan for Your Future

https://www.pamphletstoinspire.com/_files/ugd/a84285_2685c72b7410457bbb2a3e8d277d8355.pdf

