

Easter 4 – May 3, 2020 Cycle A

There are many “voices” in the world vying for, even demanding our attention – promising everything from cures for deadly diseases to the secret of “eternal” youth and “happiness”. These voices want our time, our money, our allegiance, our vote, our “firstborn”, and even our souls... should we be “suckered” in! The voices are seemingly everywhere. When I was young, the voices vying for attention came primarily via TV – especially the commercials. Common were messages like “Smoke our cigarettes and you’ll be a ‘real’ man”, or “Use our perfumes and you’ll be irresistible”. Of course, the advertisers never really came out and said these things directly, but the implication was there – in the scenery, the music, and the ruggedly handsome or alluringly beautiful models featured in the ads. Then came the “infomercial” – a commercial masquerading as a documentary or news report. Years later, the internet has followed the same of progression. Once, ads were limited to things you clicked on – things distinctly different from “content”. It didn’t take advertisers long, however, to persuade wage pages – whose creators depend on advertising dollars – to allow ads to mimic “content” in headline placement and style. Still, sophisticated users weren’t fooled very often. There are just a limited number of ways to “package” services promising to improve your “love life” or expose “alien conspiracies”! More recently, a new and much more sinister trend has emerged, selling more than simply tobacco or perfume. Supposedly objective “content” is routinely being infused with deliberate bias and even distortion. It’s a “tactic” borrowed from politics: misquote your opponents, take their words out of context, cite questionable sources as “proofs”, ignore contravening evidence, and “voilà!”, you have much of what passes for “news” today! Of course, there are still many people still dedicated to objective reporting, but in a sea of so many voices, how do you identify them? It really isn’t easy, especially in the “early” phases of any news story.

When “breaking news” happens, there is a great rush to be “first”, to get the “scoop”. Even objective reporters feel the pressure: the temptation to save time by “cutting corners”. This has always been true. But today, with objectivity “in the eye of the beholder”, first reports can be very biased, very slanted, even out right wrong – and yet made with great “confidence”, as if they are verified facts. And because there is so much money and political power at stake, “errors” are almost never admitted. But an “error” born of bias or greed is not an error at all. It’s a lie, or at best, wanton disregard for the truth. In such a time as today, how are people who sincerely want the facts to discover them? Was Bret Kavanaugh guilty of sexual assault? Is Joe Biden? To most media and political outlets, the truth seems to matter less than the outcome. Can a voice that willingly distorts reporting in one case be trusted on any? The uncomfortable truth is “No”.

Jesus once put the issue this way, whoever is “faithful in very little is faithful also in much”, and “whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much” (Luke 16:10). Like the “Boy Who Cried Wolf”, if someone lies routinely, how can you ever know should they tell the truth? On another occasion, when Jesus sent his disciples out to announce the Good News, he counseled them this way, “I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16). Jesus’ words of

wisdom apply just as surely today. A person worthy of our trust will have a “track record”, a history of honesty and integrity. Those whose words cannot be trusted are those whose “truths” are conveniently “adjusted” to suit the circumstance, whose conviction and principles are “fluid”. We must be wise and discerning, paying careful attention to what we are told; check sources, seek alternate opinions, and stay away from those who have uneven “track records”. At the same time, like doves, followers of Christ must be innocent of guile and ulterior motive. Gossip and rumor should be unknown among us. People should be taken for who we experience them to be, not as others say they are.

Someone who is honest and trustworthy enters through the front door, without pretense or hidden agenda. Anyone who tries to “sneak in” is a thief! That doesn't mean, unfortunately, that they'll always use the window. Evil is often far more clever than that. It may come to the door, well groomed and pamphlet in hand. It may come as a cleverly disguised email. It may also come purporting to be “trustworthy news”. In a world filled with so many “voices” is there any truly trustworthy source of truth, whose integrity is “above” reproach? Only one: the “Shepherd of the sheep”, who enters via the gatekeeper, whose voice is so clear and without guile that the sheep respond to it instinctively – Jesus Christ! All other “saviors” are imposters! They have “agendas” other than our good, regardless of what they claim. If we are wise and discerning, we can learn to recognize the signs of “false shepherds”, who come to “steal and kill and destroy”.

Here's the surest way to tell – they will contradict Jesus' teachings in order to gain “honor” for themselves. But discerning this is not always easy. We must be wise and remember Jesus' words, especially those commanding “our love for neighbor as self”. False “shepherds” do the opposite. They use rumor and inuendo to undermine trust between neighbors. They claim that those who look or act differently than “we do” are evil. They discount the obvious signs of trustworthiness – kindness, honesty, peacefulness, generosity, self-sacrifice... all of the traits that Jesus himself exhibited. These are tossed aside. All that matters to the false shepherd is the “agenda”; for their “end” justifies any “means”. Beware of any who follow this path. Yet, don't “hate” them. Instead, continue to be kind, honest, and generous even when it is not returned. And do not be afraid, for even if threatened or harmed, trust in this: that by such actions you are following the Good Shepherd, who leads the faithful to the abundant life of God's everlasting Kingdom! Follow his Way and you will not be lost!

Jesus came into the world to free us from our sins, that “we might live for righteousness” (1Peter 2:24). Righteousness means following the Way of Christ – a way that is not at all easy. We are surrounded by voices beckoning, “Follow me, believe me, do as I tell you...” Sometimes there are so many and at such volume that it difficult to discern the Way. But the truth is that God's Holy Spirit always points to Jesus Christ, to his life and teachings, and encourages us to trust in what Jesus had to say. Our calling is be wise and knowledgeable of the Gospels and Jesus' example in them, to shed our hates, biases, and agendas in favor of the love God poured out for the world: The Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen