

Pastoral letter for the Fourth Sunday of Easter.

My dear friends,

If you are feeling a little confused after hearing the gospel reading today, then that is quite understandable. After all Jesus's disciples didn't get it the first time and he used another parable to throw light on the first. The talk of shepherds, sheep and sheepfolds can also be difficult for us to grasp as agricultural terms are not often used in modern urban society.

Jesus shows by his parable in the first part of the gospel his close relationship with his sheep. The shepherd calls his sheep one by one; they know his voice and they follow him. There is a very close intimate relationship between the shepherd and the sheep. Since this is Vocations Sunday the emphasis for us today is on being called (the word 'vocation' comes from the Latin word *vocare*, which means to call): the sheep follow him because they know his voice. That call is made to every single person but how do we know what it is, or can we even hear it all? There is so much noise in today's world how can we hear the voice of Jesus amid the cacophony of voices and sounds which assault our senses?

St John Paul II often spoke of the call of the Good Shepherd as the Universal Call to Holiness. Everyone who has been baptised has been called to holiness. That call is unique to each of us – he calls us one by one. Our journey through life in response to God's loving purpose for us is different from the person sitting next to us. Some of us live out our vocation in a particular way such as by being married and having a family. Others will live in a religious community. Many people respond to the call to holiness through the work they do, perhaps as a teacher or in a caring profession. There are as many ways of hearing God's call and answering it as there are people on this earth. Our responsibility as Christians is to listen to God's word and hear how he is calling us individually. Hearing the call of the Jesus and responding to it is not a simple process of making a lifestyle choice. It requires getting to know Jesus so we can recognise his voice amongst the many other attractions and opportunities in life. Jesus knows us but do we know him? One way to begin to know Jesus is through prayer, giving ourselves a short time of silence each day so that he may speak to us, and speak to us he will. Although the call is particular to each of us the way we find holiness is through each other in the church so that we may be one in Christ.

To make this clear Jesus goes on to say, 'I am the gate of the sheepfold'. So, he's not just the shepherd but also the way into the sheepfold'. That doesn't sound very clear at all, but what he is saying is that it is through him that we enter an even closer relationship with him and his Father in heaven. Any other offers which may be made to us, for our future satisfaction and happiness can be false. The beauty of this new relationship with Jesus is that it is safe and gives us the freedom to come and go, to be fed with rich pastures and have the fullness of life.

Next weekend, King Charles III will be crowned as King of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. For him it will be the fulfilment of a long vocation. For many years we have watched as he remained faithful to his calling. In the coronation ceremony there is a moment when he is presented to the people and they respond in support by shouting with one voice, 'God save the King'. When a priest or deacon is presented for ordination the people acclaim, 'Thanks be to God'. These rites suggest to us that vocation doesn't come from the Lord alone but is complemented by his Body, the Church. And that should give every one of us comfort because responding to our special calling should not be lonely but supported by the whole community of the church. St John Henry Newman, who is much admired by King Charles, summed up vocation this way:

'God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another.'

So far, I have only spoken about vocation in general. Traditionally, this Sunday is used to awaken the idea of a specific vocation to priesthood or the religious life in the minds of the people. Of course, we will always need priests and religious as signs of the kingdom to which we all aspire and to be of service to the church and the world through sacraments and ministry. I cannot envisage a church without priests and religious, so I do ask you if you are single to discern whether the Lord is calling you in these ways of being his disciple. It takes courage to take the first steps as it goes against the voices which are calling you to other things, but you will not be alone. Jesus the Good Shepherd and his flock will be with you every step of the way.

May the joy of the Risen Lord be with you and your families as you reflect on his call,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Malcolm McMahon". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Archbishop Malcolm McMahon OP