

Mary Ronan - Director of Billings Catholic Campus Ministry
St Pius X Bacalaureate Mass, Sunday, May 15, 2011

In today's Gospel we heard about Jesus as our shepherd, the good shepherd. As I was reflecting about this passage I wasn't really sure what I could say. I know nothing about sheep. I know nothing about being a shepherd. I wasn't even sure how herding sheep was relevant to the life of high school senior and a soon to be college student.

As I continued to reflect on this passage, I realized that in fact Jesus' words today couldn't possibly be anymore relevant or meaningful for a group of graduates, and really for all of us here today.

Today's passage reminded me of a moment in my childhood. In the city where I grew up, Whittier, CA, there was the most adorable children's bookstore. My siblings and I loved this place, and my mom would often take us there when we were little to buy books or to kill some time on a rainy day. On this specific occasion, I was about 4 or 5 years old. The store wasn't huge by any means but the aisles and aisles of colorful books and fun toys were enough to distract a 4 year old and before long, I had wandered away from my mom and could no longer find her. I remember so vividly the panic of being lost and being absolutely terrified that I was alone. I remember searching for her anxiously, wandering the aisles of the store for what seemed like an eternity when I suddenly heard the most wonderful sound in the world... "Mary! Mary! Come on it's time to go!" I knew that voice as sure as anything. I had never been more relieved in my life! My mom was calling me by name, herding me up with the rest of my siblings, and getting ready to go home. My mom called me by name and I followed her.

In the Gospel today we heard something similar: "the sheep hear his voice as the shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." We know that Jesus is our Shepherd. It is Jesus who calls us each by name and leads us out.

The first question I challenge all of us to think about today is "*Do you know the Shepherd's voice?*" Do you know the voice of God in your life? What does it sound like?

I'm not talking about a big booming voice from the rooftops. I'm not sure many of us even have the very physical audible sense of hearing God's voice in our lives. So then how do we know what the Shepherd's voice sounds like?

The voice of God sounds differently for everyone. For some it comes through the warm embrace of a friend saying "I love you", for others it comes through the advice of a trusted mentor saying "you can do this", for others it is the gentle whisper of the wind through the trees saying "rest awhile."

The voice of God however most wonderfully emerges from deep *within ourselves*, in that place of our greatest desire, longing and restlessness. It is the small, quiet, persistent voice within each that asks “what’s next” or “why me” or “where’s God.”

Ask yourself: Do you know that voice? The one that tells you that you are not quite there yet, that you are called to do more and be more and give more for this world. It’s that voice that challenges you to examine all that for which you are truly hungry. Do you know that voice? I believe that voice is God speaking to us, inviting us to follow him, and be all that he has created us to be.

God has called each of us by name and we belong to God. God loved us so much that he brought each and every one of us into creation. Seniors, when your name is called at graduation, be reminded that you are called by God, loved by God, and meant for wonderful things in life through God. You are called by name to be uniquely you.

This leads me to the second question that I want to challenge us to think about. I remind you again that in today’s gospel we heard that, “the shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”

He leads them out. Yes, we do follow Jesus our Good Shepherd but have we ever wondered to where we’re following him? Let’s ask ourselves... “*Where exactly is Jesus leading us?*”

This is a question most of us have struggled with from time to time, and can be particularly stressful during moments like graduation when it’s at the forefront of our minds. What comes next? I don’t mean what college are you attending in the fall or what are you doing this summer or who’s graduation party will you go to. Those are all important, but let’s think bigger.

“What kind of life do you want to live?”

Think about it for a moment. What kind of life do you want to live? What do you want to become? *Who* do you want to become? How do you want to live your life?

Big questions. Daunting questions. Scary questions even. I know for a fact that if you asked the majority of adults in this church, they would tell you that they are still seeking answers to these questions themselves. These are questions that take a lifetime to figure out.

When God calls you by name, he calls you to become the best possible version of yourself. God has loved you into being and you are responsible for making the most of this one life. Jesus our Good Shepherd is leading us to and through this challenge and responsibility of living a God-centered life with hope and integrity.

So again, that question, “*Where exactly is Jesus leading you?*”

Jesus is leading you to freedom. To goodness. To grace.
Jesus is leading you to love yourself and serve others.
He is leading you to find your passions and pursue them.
He is leading you to find your own truths and live by them.
He is leading you to seek and find God everywhere everyday.

Through all of these things, through the endless journeys life will take you on, through your biggest successes and worst mistakes and even all of the ordinary everyday stuff in between, through the support and love of the community around you, and through those quiet moments when you stop long enough to take a deep breath and listen to that voice deep within you, you will find and live out the courage and conviction to be who God calls you to be.

Graduates, I want to leave you with a favorite quote of mine from Pedro Arrupe who was the Superior General of the Jesuits during the 1970s.

Nothing is more practical than finding God, that is, than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you will do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love; stay in love; and it will decide everything.

Never forget this...God loves you. God is in love with you. God invites you every day to fall in love with him. When you find God and love God, you will also find and become who you are meant to be, the best possible version of yourself, the place to which Jesus leads you.

As we go forth today may we learn to hear the Shepherd's voice within us calling us by name. May we dream fully, live fully, and love fully. May we accept the responsibility and the gift to be who God wants us to be.

Graduates, always know that are our thoughts and prayers are with you as you follow your Shepherd and take this next step in your journey.