

Fourth Sunday in Easter A

The movie “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade” follows the exploits of all those who are seeking the Holy Grail and their reasons for it. The Grail calls out to them with a voice that promises something to each. An American who has thrown his lot in with the Nazis, wants to live forever so he can be the most powerful man in the world. A German Archeologist wants to remain forever as beautiful as she is. Indiana’s father has pursued the Grail all his life and want the joy of finding it. Indiana doesn’t believe in the Grail but gets caught up in the challenge and mystery as he chases after his father.

At the climax of the film, they discover that they must survive several life-threatening tests to reach the Grail itself. But they also discover that the Grail cannot be taken from its resting place. When the beautiful Nazi archeologist tries to run away with it the ground opens and the cup falls into the crevasse. She tries to reach it but cannot and starts to fall when Jones catches her arm. She keeps insisting that she can reach the Grail while Jones begs her to grab his arm so he can save her life. But she will not listen. Because she will not let go of her vain attempts to own the Grail, she falls to her death. You ask, why *she* was seeking the Grail.

Where does that voice come from? Finding your own voice is popular advice given to writers and other artists. I often tell those who are preparing to preach that they have to find their own voice in which to proclaim God’s call. It isn’t unlike Aristotle’s “know thyself.” While there is truth to the advice it can lead a narcissistic soul to assume that he or she has something to say that the world needs to hear. In a 1956 interview, William Faulkner said: **“The child has the capacity to do but it can’t know. It only knows when it is no longer able to do...after age forty. Between twenty and forty the will of the child to *do* gets stronger and more dangerous, but it has not begun to learn to *know* yet. Since his capacity to *do* is forced into channels of evil through environment and pressures, man is *strong* before he is moral. The worlds anguish is caused by people between twenty and forty”** (Paris Review, Spring 1956).

Faulkner goes on to cite both Hitler and Stalin as examples of what he means. Of course, since that interview sixty years ago, there have been many less notorious but equally narcissistic voices causing pain. Faulkner was not arguing against finding one’s unique voice as a writer, rather he was reminding his interviewer and those listening in that every voice must be weighed by where it comes from and where it leads.

Today the Lord Jesus says plainly that there are essentially two voices in the world...the voice of the Shepherd and the voice of the thief. The shepherd’s voice leads to abundant life. The thief’s voice leads to death. In the Sermon on the Mount the Lord says, “By their fruits, you will know them.”

A businessman friend likes to say: “If a deal is not good for everyone, it’s not a good deal.” And that’s another way to track where a voice comes from. In the past forty years, so much pain has been caused by narcissistic writers urging people to claim their own voice without weighing the consequences. The person who walks out on her family, because she has been urged to follow her bliss and do what feels good to herself, is

listening not to the shepherd's voice but to the thief's. The person who makes a fortune singing about sex, drugs, and violence does not want to take responsibility for having helped to ruin countless lives of impressionable young people who have not yet begun to understand that actions have consequences. Such a person may think her voice unique, when it is nothing other than the thief's voice having snatched both body and soul. The voice of the thief is often disguised as the voice of reason. In the arena of debate that surrounds the topic of abortion, I have heard a Catholic who has said that they would support abortion in the instance of rape, incest, or birth defects. I had a friend who has struggled for years with cerebral palsy. His answer to that is "So, I shouldn't be here? I don't deserve to live?" Or the pro-life activist who said that she was a child born as a result of a rape. She asked in essence the same question: "So, I shouldn't be here? I don't deserve to live?"

Robert Frost's famous poem "two roads diverged in a yellow wood" is an illustration of the struggle to choose the right one. That is repeatedly our dilemma. If you focus on developing two talents, you cannot devote the time you would have been able to if you had chosen only one talent. If you take this job, you exclude other jobs. If you marry this person, you rule out others that you could have married. If you forego child-rearing when you are a younger woman, you may not as easily become a parent at a later time. More pointedly, some choices are better for us and others, and some are worse.

The gospel challenge for us today is to think about which voice we are heeding as we go along in life. Often we may not be paying attention to the fact that we are heeding any voice other than our own. An old friend used to say that his teenagers would say, "Don't tell me what to do." But then he said they would turn around and let their friends tell them what to do. Today Jesus gives us clarity for decision making. The thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy. The shepherd comes that we may have life abundantly. Like a piano tuner wielding a tuning fork, we need our ears to be opened to the shepherd's voice as the voice of life, the voice that tunes our ears rightly so that our discerning and deciding will be guided by the voice of life and not of death.

One former parishioner told me the story of having been taken in as a teenager by the charm of the biggest man on campus, the football quarterback. Of course, once he had gotten what he wanted, he suddenly didn't know who she was. She ended up being pregnant and went away to have the baby. Once the baby was born, he was given for adoption. The woman went on to college, to marriage, to having a child, to being divorced, and finally in late middle age to being re-married. One day she was contacted by her son, who was grown, married and the father of two children. When they met, it was very emotional for both. He said: "Thank you for giving me life. Thank you for not having an abortion. I have a wonderful life. My parents, the people who raised me, were loving and godly people who gave me every opportunity. I just wanted to meet you to say how grateful I am that you gave birth to me. I have a wonderful life."

Another former parishioner told a somewhat similar story, but she chose an abortion because it was promoted as the best option. She didn't want her parents to be angry with her or to be disappointed in her, and because she didn't want her college or professional

career to be hampered by an unwarranted pregnancy. All the voices were saying: *“It’s your body, and so you have the right to choose. The man is not affected in any way by the consequences of this pregnancy. This isn’t the right time to have a baby.”* And so she went on with her life, with marriage and then divorce, until the day some years later that she began to think about how old her child would be. It was heart wrenching to see children the same age as hers would have been. The pain for her was severely life-changing.

One had listened to the voice of life, the other the voice of death, and that made all the difference for two children. One could apply the Lord’s question about which voice one is listening to in regards to other serious issues such as pornography, infidelity, the all pervasive decision among young people to play house before they get married, and I could go on an on. Beginning already in early childhood, there is a cacophony of voices clamoring to be heard on how one should live one’s life. If you listen to popular culture both in the media and on the campus and in the work-place, there is a type of cultural orthodoxy that says to be true to your feelings or be true to your instincts or be true to what your teachers are saying. But Jesus says, *“Listen to the shepherd’s voice. It is the way to abundant life. The thief’s voice is the voice that comes to steal, kill, and destroy.”*

Universalism is not a Christian doctrine. The New Testament teaches that there is a way of life and a way of death and one cannot take both. C. S. Lewis wrote: *“Jesus is either the incarnate Son of God or he is a madman. There is no in-between.”* Someone else once wrote: *“It’s the people who want to be Christian and non-Christian at the same time who are in the muddle.”* If one knowingly chooses the way of death repeatedly, one finally becomes destined for separation from God...not because that’s what God wants but because that is what those people want and, sadly, what they deliberately choose.

At the end of the Indiana Jones film, having just witnessed the foolishness of the beautiful archeologist, Jones demonstrates how really smart people can follow the bad choices of others and do really dumb things. Indiana climbs down and also and tries to reach the Grail. His father, the one who has spent his entire life searching for this Grail, reaches out to him as says: *“Indiana, let it go.”* The son wavers, almost making the same fatally insane choice as the beautiful archeologist, but, then, finally, the younger Jones turns, grabs hold of his father’s arms, and is pulled to safety. He listens to the voice of life and is saved.

How can we tune our ears to the voice of the shepherd? We begin each week by gathering around God’s word. The more we hear the word of God the more likely we are to recognize its message is for us personally. If we do it every day we are shaped by that word in such a way that it becomes the predominant voice. St. John Paul the II taught constantly about the clash between the culture of life that listens to and obeys the shepherd’s voice, speaking through the scripture and the teaching authority of the Church, and the culture of death that listens seemingly to billions of voices but finally are echoes of the thief’s voice...the one who comes to steal, kill, and destroy.

There are people who incongruously believe that they can be both Christians and non-Christians at the same time. It's a lie. It is the voice of the thief speaking in pious and even seemingly loving tones. Think here of the serpent in the Garden of Eden asking: "Did God really say you shall not eat from any of the trees in the garden...? Think of that old Luther Ingram song: *"If loving you is wrong, I don't wanna be right."* Think of that tired old adolescent sentiment repeated endlessly: "I have to be who I really am." Of course, people never ask how they can know who they really are if they are listening to the voice of someone, usually not at all a disinterested party, who is trying to convince them who they really are.

If Jesus was a madman and not the Son of God, then listening to his voice wouldn't be as consequential as perhaps listening to Luther Ingram or to that less-than-disinterested friend who probably wants to take something from you. But if Jesus is the Incarnate Son of God who alone can take away the sins of the world, open the future to you now in the washing of baptism, and give you life that goes on even after your body dies...then not listening to him has eternal consequences. And that, of course, is why the old thief, the father of lies, wants us not to listen to the Good Shepherd, the voice of life. As Jesus warns passionately, the thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy. Choose to train your ear to Christ, choose to listen to his voice. Choose the right road. And that road, is the road that if taken will make all the difference forever.