

4th Sunday of Easter cycle C

You can go up to a doorbell; you can push a doorbell button. You can hear the doorbell ring inside the house, but none of that guarantees that somebody is going to answer your call. A lot of the time, people aren't home: the bell rings, but nobody is there to hear it; you've called, but to no end. Sometimes, a person is home, and you ring the bell sure enough, but they don't hear it: they're in the shower, or in some part of the house where they can't hear the bell, or maybe out back, or maybe they have the TV or stereo on too loud; you've done your part, but they are being prevented from responding. Sometimes, the person may be afraid to answer the door; sometimes, you ring the bell, the person's home, they hear the bell, they know you're there, they're not afraid, but they just plain don't want to deal with you — and so they ignore you. In every scenario, the call was made when the button was pushed; calling someone, by doorbell, by telephone, by shouting out their name, by letter, by any means — in no way means that they must — or will — answer the call.

In the first reading today from the Acts of the Apostles, Paul and Barnabas are on the preaching circuit: they've landed at Antioch in Pisidia, and we are told that the synagogue was filled, that the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord, and that many people had followed Paul and Barnabas there, and that they reminded the people that it was by God's grace that they had ever been God's chosen people and that they needed to remain faithful to that grace of God by coming to the fullness of faith, by embracing this last and most urgent part of God's revelation to them. Namely, they must accept Jesus as the Son of God who died for their sins, rose from the dead, and who is the only way to heaven. Paul and Barnabas had a message, but they also had several opponents who didn't want their message going out; the leaders of the people did not want the people to hear God's call to faith, because more than loving God, they loved the power and acclaim which came with being leaders of the people, and being the type of leaders who were served by those over whom they had authority. And so they prevented, or tried to prevent, the Word from going out: they contradicted Paul and Barnabas, claimed as true things which were not true, and purported as true things that they knew were false. They tried to shout the apostles down: two apostles against how many? Easy enough to have several people "engaged in debate" so that soon, only one side of the debate is being heard. Then, they persecuted them: if Paul and Barnabas wouldn't leave the city, then make life miserable for them. And finally, they simply expelled them; threw them out of the town. Of course, God is not prevented from achieving what he wants; and many people likely came to faith. But nonetheless, it was a struggle for the apostles to get the word out: as easy as it is to call people, it is equally easy to have your message overwhelmed by others.

The message which was being delivered by Paul and Barnabas and all the other early apostles still goes out through the world today, and it is still going out through God's chosen vehicle, his Church. The word was handed on in those early days primarily through preaching and instruction; shortly after this period, the Gospels took form, as certain evangelists were inspired by the Holy Spirit to start writing these stories about Jesus down. Letters explaining the faith began circulating, and the New Testament slowly took form. The Church was an active instrument in determining how much of what was written truly reflected the faith, how much really reflected the truth; and the Church, especially through the magisterium, the teaching office of the pope and bishops, has remained active throughout the centuries by interpreting, by the help of the Holy Spirit, what all this really means. And so a key component in the spread of the faith has been vocations: God calling certain members of the Church to set aside their lives, their pursuits, their plans, their desires, so that they can devote themselves to the service of God, and to serving the flock. Some find their niche in preaching, some in studying and writing, some in teaching, some in administrating; most in some combination of those, but many have been called, and all have been called for one primary reason: so that the word which was preached way back in the days of Saint Paul, may continue to spread and to touch lives, and hearts, the world over for the rest of time.

This weekend the Church is observing the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. The word vocation literally means "calling"; one does not simply choose to enter into a vocation, but must first be called by God. God calls most people to the vocation of marriage, but he also calls several to the priesthood and to the religious life. But just like that doorbell, whose nature it is to call people to the door but which may or may not fulfill its purpose depending on how those who hear its call respond, so too may God call many to the priesthood and to the religious life, but his call not be answered. We hear quite a bit about the vocations crisis; and if there is a vocations crisis, we as a church need to discern if the crisis lies with the call not being made, the call being made but not being heard, or the call being made and being heard but not being answered. As we heard in Acts of the Apostles, one of the tactics employed by opponents of the faith was persecution: make life so miserable for the apostles that they would grow disheartened and discouraged and just give up on spreading the word. I don't think we're persecuting our young to discourage them from vocations, but many are being discouraged in other ways from answering God's call. We live in, and in many cases unwittingly support, a culture that insists that there's but one road to happiness: find a good paying job, find an attractive spouse, have two children, own a nice home, have nice gadgets; the American Dream. The underlying message: if you don't have money, and you don't have a spouse, and you don't have kids, you can't really be

happy. It's amazing how many people actually buy into this, and how many Catholic youths are discouraged from considering a vocation because someone else in their lives believes that they just really can't be happy without those things. Sometimes, the call is made but people are prevented from hearing it: think about the popular culture and especially the attitude towards celibacy. Good heavens, if our youth watch any show with higher than a TV-G rating, I don't know if you can watch for a half-hour without being hit with a message that nobody can live chastely; not for any significant period of time, and certainly not for a lifetime. But I personally believe that if there's a crisis, it's one that's being fueled by a rejection of what the priesthood is. If the faithful question the truths of the faith, if we treat the Eucharistic as though it were mere bread and wine rather than the Body and Blood of Christ, if we call it bread and wine rather than the Body and Blood of Christ; if we skip Mass, neglect confession, live life in such a way that they really don't need to have a priest around, who would possibly feel called to that life? It is a life of sacrifice; but if someone is given the message that the sacrifice isn't really important, why would they answer the call to it?

Jesus said "my sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me." I believe that God is still calling; moreover, I believe that the sheep will continue to hear his voice and that they will continue to hear his voice through his Church. Because if there has been vocations shortage, I believe there can also be a rebirth. For that rebirth to come about, though, all of us must *encourage* vocations rather than discourage them: point out the great things about the vocation: standing at the altar consecrating the Eucharist, or for young women, the interior joy of being espoused to Christ as it were through sacred vows. Not everyone will be called, but more will be open to it if they see in religious vocations not just a different kind of life, but a great life. Next, challenge the culture rather than capitulate to it. We don't have to turn off our TVs and cancel all our subscriptions, but when presented with situations which contradict the faith or the moral teachings of the Church, call them on it, and point out especially to young people who are exposed to it, the errors in the worldly way of thinking. And finally, mostly, we should embrace vocations by embracing what the priest uniquely does as a priest: make Mass, even daily Mass if possible, a priority; get to confession regularly; make Eucharistic Holy Hours. Show our young people that priests are indispensable for the kind of life we want to live as Catholics. On this day of prayer for vocations, when the readings remind us that man is free to try to shout down or ignore God's calls, we also know that God will never abandon us and never leave us without shepherds for the flock. Believe that God will call — work so that his call may be heard — and then pray that his calls will be answered.