

His Master's Voice



You may not be familiar with his name, but most of us will probably recognise this dog immediately. Painted in 1908 by Francis Barraud, the painting of Nipper would become a global icon and logo for major recording companies and record shops for over a century. The painting, titled “His Master’s Voice”, shows Nipper listening to a phonograph recording, his head tilted slightly in curiosity and puzzlement. The recording was, of course, the voice of his master. Nipper recognises the voice even though rather puzzled at where it is coming from.

I am struck by how frequently examples from the natural world and everyday life, formed the basis for Jesus’ sayings and teaching recorded in the Gospels. While these familiar images were used to drive home lessons to his hearers, they also reveal that God’s care is for every living creature, even a sparrow that falls to the ground (Matthew 10:29).

What comes across from the Gospels is the affinity and respect Jesus had for the land he lived in. He walked lightly in it; he was like Abraham, a pilgrim in the land rather than having a possessive attitude towards it. In contrast our Western, urbanised way of life distances us from the natural world on which we depend, and we have largely lost that immediate connection so evident in the gospels. The Season of Creation that some of our churches have been following, is a timely call to both celebrate and respect creation with a sense of wonder as Vincent encouraged us last week.

So what might Nipper have to say to us? The painting reminds me of Jesus’ saying in John 10: 27 that “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.” Many voices ask for our attention, but underneath all these often-noisy voices is a still, small voice that repeatedly says, 'You are my Beloved, my favour rests on you.' As Henri Nouwen put it: “the voice of Love, calling you Beloved”. This voice truly knows us and knowing us, calls us to follow. Gathering in silent prayer, we lean into each other in prayerful support to quieten the other competing voices and thoughts in our heads and hear the silent Voice that calls us 'my Beloved'.

Martin Laird in his wonderful book *Into the Silent Land*, says the Shepherd's voice is not a sound to be found, but something that is already echoing within us, for God is "closer to us, than we are to ourselves." The continuous stream of thoughts, anxieties and distractions that we encounter, creates an illusion of separation from God. However, these are just "clouds" passing through the sky. The voice of the Shepherd is the sky itself—the deep, silent, unwounded space that remains unaffected by the weather. The Shepherd's voice is the very ground of our awareness.

Like Nipper, when we hear the master’s voice, we know it! And what emerges within as our noise subsides, is not a scratchy recording, but the living, loving word of God.

To lead us into silence this evening, verses from John 10: 27-30:

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.

To lead us from Silence:

All loving Father,
Today I have glimpsed You in the faces of the people I've seen,
Caught the sound of Your voice in their laughter and cries of pain,
Touched Your hands in the warmth or coldness of their hands.
I have sought You in the ups and downs of my heart,
In loneliness and love, in sorrow and joy,
In the midst of my inner turmoil and in quiet moments of peace.
And yet my soul is still restless and my heart still longs for more.
Let me rest now in the quiet of this night
And remember that as much as I seek you,
You are seeking me even more and hold me in your heart
As Your beloved child.

Amen.

Henri Nouwen Ending of day prayer