

12th July 2015
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves – Saint Matthew 7:15.



In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Today's Gospel from the Sermon on the Mount reminds us that evil is nothing else than the corruption of some good that a thing should possess: without an experience of truth, we would be unable to recognize error; without an experience of beauty we would be unable to recognize ugliness. Therefore, when Our Lord in today's Gospel passage warns us against *false* shepherds, he naturally presupposes the existence of some *true* shepherd, of which these false prophets dressed in sheep's clothing are but a parody. The true "shepherd ... of [our] souls" (I Pet 2:25), of course, is none other than the *Good Shepherd* (John 10:11), Our Lord Jesus Christ himself (Heb 13:20). The urgent warning in today's Gospel invites us to reflect on two points: first, how to discern the false shepherds – the wolves in sheep's clothing – who are trying to lead us astray; and, secondly, the way for us to make sure that we are listening instead to the voice of the Good Shepherd. It is absolutely essential for us to be forewarned against these wolves in sheep's clothing because Our Lord warns all Christians of later ages, "Behold, I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves" (Matt 10:16).

First of all, who are these false shepherds? If we were to look at the history of the Church we might think of certain tyrants or heretics. But, today, the danger is greater in many ways, because more subtle. Because of the saturation of popular culture we are constantly bombarded through the television, the internet and even through our schools with opinions contrary to the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ. The wolf appears to us today in the sheep's clothing of political correctness and open-mindedness. I don't know if you also have noticed that so often today the enemies of Christianity do not even bother to mount sophisticated arguments like the bold atheists of the so-called Enlightenment; no, today, even thinking seems to be too much effort, and so false doctrine is spread not so much by argument as by insinuation. In a word, our contemporaries now think almost entirely in *slogans*: things like, "what difference does your religion make? all roads lead up the same mountain," or "equal rights for all," or "just follow your conscience." The voice of the false prophet, even when he speaks in a pleasant tone, is always in opposition with the spirit of faith.

But enough about these wolves. If we want to make sure we are listening to the Good Shepherd, there are two things we need to do: *speaking his language* and *recognizing his voice*. In other words, to arm ourselves against the slogans of the false shepherds we need to have a fervent spirit of faith. To “speak the language” of Our Lord means to believe the truths which he has taught us; “recognizing someone’s voice” comes about through regular conversation with that person, as between two friends. When one of those two friends is God, that conversation is called prayer.

First, faith. The Gospels tell us: “He who is of God hears the word of God” (John 8: 47). On the other hand, the false prophet is one who tries to impose new and fashionable opinions in place of the “faith once delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3). This is the opposite of the teaching of Jesus Christ, who assures us, “my teaching is not my own, but his who sent me” (John 7:16). We must never forget that the Catholic Church is no mere man-made community, but the very continuation of Jesus Christ here among us. And so, the teaching of the Church, even when unpopular, is like the teaching of Christ himself: not her own but that of her founder.

When a catechumen is baptized, the priest asks him at the threshold of the church, “What do you ask of the Church of God?” and the answer is “Faith.” Faith is the beginning and foundation of our spiritual life. God’s word is an invitation; faith is our response. Faith is not a feeling or a vague emotion but the real adherence of our mind to the eternal truths which God has freely shared with us. It is thus easy to see why, in the words of Saint Paul, “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb 11:6).

To Pontius Pilate Our Lord said, “everyone who is of the truth hears my voice” (John 18:37). That brings us to the last point, the importance of prayer: we must learn to recognize Our Lord’s voice, amidst the din of the false shepherds. Our faith is not a dry intellectual doctrine, and that is why we must *nurture* the friendship which has begun with the gift of faith. Prayer is nothing else than a respectful yet childlike and confident conversation with our God. In the parable of the Good Shepherd (John 10:1-18), Our Lord reminds us several times that when it comes to the true leader of the flock, “the sheep follow him, *for they know his voice*.” By spending some time every day in prayer we come more and more to attune the ear of our soul to the voice of the Good Shepherd.

It is precisely by being friends of God, and growing in his friendship day by day, that we are certain to avoid the lies of the false prophets and the teeth of the wolf. We know that the false prophets of this world will try to tempt us first by empty pleasures, and when that fails will resort to persecution. May God grant us the grace to be strong against the seductions and persecutions of

this world and its sloganeering prophets. Our Good Shepherd has already chased away the wolves with the wood of his Cross, and so we can say confidently, along with Saint John, “This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith” (I John 5:4).

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.