

**Fourth Sunday of Easter – April 29, 2007
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Mullens, WV
John 10:22-30 – Hearing the Voice of Jesus
in the Anglican Way**

The Rev. Kent Higgins

From the Gospel: *So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice."*

Sometimes I wonder if, when Jesus humbled himself to become human, to become one of us, he knew quite what to expect. Maybe he did understand beforehand how incredibly dense we humans can be, and it is only my own frustration that comes to the surface as I listen to a person very much like me asking a question of Jesus that I think must have been truly annoying.

"Come on Jesus, enough of this fooling around. We've seen your miracles and heard your teaching, and you're probably good enough to really be the Messiah. But we don't want to bet on the wrong horse, because if you aren't the Messiah and we go around saying you are, we could be in a lot of trouble. So come on, be a good fellow, tell us plainly."

How often, I wonder, do we approach Jesus in that way?

Maybe it's the way we approach relationship in general.

Maybe when we talk about being someone's friend, or loving someone, we really want to wait to be sure they want to be our friend before we make a commitment. Why should I go out on a limb when I'm not sure you'll be there with me?

So I hear the people questioning Jesus, and I'm sorry to say that I might well have been one of them. Couldn't you make this just a little easier for me, Jesus of Nazareth?

How little I appreciate the amazing grace by which God has already reached out to me, has already made it easier than I have any right to expect.

The response that Jesus gives those who questioned him – and the answer he gives us as we read this story in Scripture – is typical of his teachings. It is part rebuke – “I told you and I showed you and you didn’t believe me” – and it is part full of hope, an invitation to believe, certainly not an abandonment of one who might become one of his sheep.

Those who questioned Jesus were asking for certainty, for absolute knowledge; black or white with no shades of gray. Off or on. Zero or one if you’re a computer geek. But the world of faith and belief has no place in it for a priori knowledge. If you know something to be truth, what place is there for faith? If you know that today is Sunday, you would never say “I believe this is Sunday.”

What Jesus says to those who were asking for definitive proof is that it doesn’t work that way. And this is where the gentleness and the encouragement of his message comes through. Jesus says that if we believe in him, then we have the gift of everlasting life.

I’d like to say a few words about how Anglican tradition hears the message in today’s Gospel, or perhaps I can put that better by pointing out how today’s Gospel reading informs Anglican tradition and Anglican reading of Scripture.

This is not an attempt to enter into a discussion of the present travail afflicting the Anglican Communion. To be honest, and you’ll forgive me, to be a bit blunt about it, as much as I love the liturgy, music, and customs of the Church of England that have been passed down to us, it makes no difference to me if the Anglican Communion exists or does not. I think Anglicanism, the classic kind of which I speak, has something valuable to offer the world. But if it comes to a choice between worshipping God as he has been revealed to The Episcopal Church and trying to maintain the Communion, it’s adios to Lambeth Palace.

The classic Anglican reading of Scripture is that we read the Bible, not as a set of absolute rules, but as a place in which God can converse with us and show us what he has in mind for us. William Countryman is an Episcopal priest who is on the faculty of the Church Divinity School of the Pacific. He is the author of numerous books, but I have brought to you today a short document that he prepared for General Convention two-thousand-three. The document is called *Dealing with Conflict as Anglicans*, and it makes clear that we hold no special claim to know the mind of God in a way which excludes other’s experiences of God.

Countryman also makes the point that such a view is counter-cultural in the United States of America, and I agree. Our church offers a place where it is all right to think about the Bible, to wrestle with what it means. We have no place for anyone to tell us “This is for sure and for certain what God is saying in such-and-so a passage.”

Does it remind you of what I said about Jesus and his frustrated response to those men who, in today’s Gospel, asked Jesus for certainty? Jesus tells us to have faith.

I hope you will take Countryman’s article home and read it and consider what it has to offer. The Episcopal Church makes no claim to be right about what it is doing. We do not deny that we may make mistakes. In fact, we acknowledge that we have made mistakes in the past, are probably making some now, and will certainly do so in the future.

At our best, we are neither certain, nor do we act as if we are. But we are faithful. Oh yes, at our best, we believe that we are doing the work calls us to do. We believe that we hear the voice of Jesus, speaking to us as a shepherd calls to his sheep. We know that he is our Lord, and he knows that we are his own. And thanks be to God for his grace, with that faith we will never perish but have everlasting life!