

Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 17, 2016

Even if we can't explain it, we may be aware that Einstein's theory of relativity threw a monkey wrench into Newton's "modern" physics. What we may not have thought about is the devastating effect his theory has on the individualism that characterizes so much of modern philosophy.

For example, René Descartes intended to tell the truth when he said, "I think, therefore I am." But his theory was seriously flawed, and not just because of the old joke that goes like this: "Descartes walked into a bar and the bartender asked if he wanted a beer. Descartes said, 'I think not,' and he disappeared."

What is no joke is that the individualism Descartes believed in was unsound from the beginning. He would have had no ability to speak or formulate his thoughts if someone had not taught him to talk. Descartes, like all of us, was not the sum total of his thoughts, but the sum of his relationships, and that's what today's Gospel is about.

While we call this "Good Shepherd Sunday," our readings are more about good sheep than their shepherd. Jesus' short discourse comes in reply to the question a not-so-friendly crowd put to him about whether or not he was the Messiah.

Refusing to fall into the trap of allowing himself to be defined by their concept of what a messiah should be, he replied that they could not understand him because they were not among his sheep and then went on to describe those who are his own.

In the few verses we hear today, Jesus says a great deal about the love he bears his own and its effect on them. We can hear these words as an invitation to move from individualism to mysticism.

First of all, in the Gospel as in our reading from Revelation, the faithful are referred to as a people, even a great multitude, rather than as individuals – a pretty solid hint that salvation is not simply a “Jesus and Me” affair. And in terms of what Jesus’ sheep do, there’s not much to put on your résumé.

According to Jesus, they hear and follow him. That’s a simple assignment that draws us into an amazingly multidimensional world of relationships.

Pope Francis tells us in “The Joy of the Gospel” that a committed relationship with God “at the same time commits us to serving others ... learning to find Jesus in the faces of others, in their voices, in their pleas.” Obviously, then, following the shepherd means really listening to the voices of others, especially those who need us.

Do we realize what’s going to happen when we listen? When we really listen for a long time? Our accent is going to change. We’re going to start to sound like the people we listen to (Like Descartes probably spoke first like his grandmother, and then like his Jesuit teachers). That change of accent will be one that not only affects our speech but also our vision. We will start to see things the way others do. And then, little by little, our identity is going to change.

We’re going to find ourselves as part of the multitude described in our second reading from Revelation. That was a profound community (so much for individualism). They were a seemingly unruly throng of multiple nations, races and languages. Their only source of unity came from passing through the suffering that made them belong to the One who gave them everything they needed, including one another.

On this Fourth Sunday of Easter, our readings invite us to reconsider our identity, to abandon ideas about self-sufficiency in favor of solidarity. Acts uses the example of some stubborn synagogue members to warn that clinging too tightly to what

we know will blind us to the newness God is offering. The reading from Revelation will draw us into its dream about the joyful communion to which God has destined all of creation.

Finally, Jesus' description of his sheep is an open invitation for us to join them. As he said, we need do no more and no less than to simply listen and to follow.

That is all it takes to be transformed into one of his own. That's what it means to be a mystic — someone who participates in Jesus' union with the Father.

The readings for this Sunday combine to offer us very practical mysticism, a way of life that is deeply involved in the events of each day and highly attuned to the grace offered in every moment.

Acts reminds us that our Christian vision needs to be expressed in terms that everyone can understand even though many of them will refuse to do so. The Book of Revelation and John's Gospel invite us to dream, to remember and to imagine our destiny, as we move in joy and sorrow toward the glory that will one day be revealed.