

A film that became something of a classic some 15-20 years ago was the film ‘Dead Poets’ Society’ starring the late Robin Williams. It is one of those films that would still appear on the TV from time to time. It is set in an elite boys’ private school in the United States. This school has a strong sense of its traditions, having a record of producing leaders in both the political and business establishment.

A new teacher, John Keating, arrives in the school. In the scene I have in mind, he takes his class out into the corridor and gets them to stand in front of a wall of photographs of former pupils from years before. He introduces them to the phrase ‘Carpe Diem’, seize the day.- seize the opportunities they have to grow and develop, to become men, to realise their own greatness. Then he gets them to draw close to the wall of photographs, to look, to be totally quiet and to listen. As they awkwardly follow his instructions, he whispers behind them, ‘Carpe diem – seize the day – listen to what these men are saying to you.’

Listen. Listen. This scene came to my mind as I reflected on our Gospel reading this morning and the rest of this 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of John’s Gospel in which it is set. Our Gospel reading is part of a much longer passage in which Jesus reflects on himself as the Good Shepherd and the relationship between flock and shepherd. As you read this 10<sup>th</sup> chapter there is a recurring theme of the sheep hearing, listening, recognising the shepherd’s voice.

We can hear something without necessarily taking much notice. The radio, the TV can be on in the background – it can be noise to which we don’t pay

much attention. Listening is different; when we listen we begin to focus on what we hear, pay attention to what is said.

In his teaching, Jesus is drawing on an image that would have been familiar to his followers, the intimate relationship between the shepherd and the sheep; the shepherd as protector, as guardian in face of danger. At a number of points of this 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus will return to theme of the shepherd calling, the sheep hearing and responding to the familiar voice.

We live in a world of many and varied voices. Our children are growing up in a world of many and varied voices. There are voices that engender fear; fear of not being accepted by our peer group; a pressure to conform to other people's standards, other people's values in matters of faith, of morals, of priorities. There is a fear of standing out as different. It is not that the opinions of friends and family are of no value but they should not necessarily determine our own.

There are the voices of materialism that suggest that our contentment, our value can be found in what we have or aspire to have – the house we live in, the car we drive, the clothes we wear. Again this does not mean that we must live in sackcloth in a tent by the side of the road. Spike Milligan put it rather nicely when he said: 'Money may not buy you happiness but you get a better class of misery.'

Then there are those other gentler, maybe less strident, less demanding voices. I think of the story of Elijah fleeing for his life, taking refuge in a cave, being

captivated not by earthquake, wind or fire – but rather by a gentle whisper, or sound of sheer silence – in it he experienced, in it he heard the voice of God.

I go back to that scene in ‘Dead Poets’ Society’ as the teacher told his class to be still, to quiet, to listen, to listen. What we are talking about here is attentiveness, being prepared to allow ourselves time and space to step back from the busy-ness, the hustle and bustle, the urge to fill our time, our children’s time with activity, with noise.

When parents bring their children for Baptism, the first questions they will be asked will centre on the environment within which their children will be brought up, one in which the values of the Gospel will get a positive encouragement. I sometimes put it another way – an environment within which their child can hear God’s call on their lives.

I go back to the picture of the shepherd and the flock. There are many sounds that the sheep may hear on the hillside – the sounds of fellow sheep, of wind and rain, of predators – and then the sound of the shepherd, the sound of one who protects, who feeds, who guides.

Maybe one of the most valuable lessons we learn in life, one of the most valuable lessons we teach our children is that of attentiveness, of discernment, of what is right and what is wrong, of finding in God one in whom and through whom we can find our peace, our purpose, our contentment – one in whose presence we can enjoy all the blessings of this life, our possessions, our friends, our life.