

Clongowes Wood College, 12 May 2019

Blessed John Sullivan Mass

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER – YEAR C

*“The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice.”*¹ The big thing in business innovation today is voice recognition, facial recognition, touch recognition. In an age when we are more conscious than ever on how our personal data is stored and for what purposes it is used, there are dangers when our voice, face or touch are used to determine recognition. What is to stop someone downloading our image from a computer screen, recording our voice, skimming our touch and using that image, that voice, that touch without our consent or permission? Facial recognition technology; voice recognition technology; touch recognition technology is a far remove from the days we simply put our names on our copy books. I remember those days well. *“Denis Nulty, Slane, County Meath, Ireland, Europe, The World, The Universe”*. Yes, I wrote it on everything even the kitchen table!

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, Vocations Sunday I vividly recall my mother on that same kitchen table sewing on ‘*name tags*’ meticulously onto every bit of clothing before I went off to the seminary, that’s now thirty-eight years ago! It was on the Instruction Sheet, before departing for seminary. It didn’t in any way safeguard against socks parting company with one another and never making their journey back from the Presentation Convent laundry up the road from Maynooth College! Where are all those odd socks now, I often wonder? Well here is one of those same nametags thirty-eight years later!

The fourth Sunday of Easter always presents us a passage from St. John’s Gospel on the Good Shepherd. Year A offers us ten verses from Chapter 10; Year B offers us eight verses while this afternoon, at our annual Mass

¹Jn. 10:27

of Thanksgiving honouring Blessed John Sullivan, falling in Year C we are simply given four verses. Perhaps today's four verses, say as much and more than the ten of two years ago and last year's eight?

Let's look a little closer ... "*the sheep that belong listen to my voice*"² ... grass was scarce in Palestine; flocks moved about, they were reared more for wool and milk rather than meat. Sheep are often stubborn and difficult to handle, so building up a relationship with the shepherd, his voice, his face, his touch was so important. So the sheep got to know their shepherd and he grew to know them, their temperament, their character, their movement pattern. And so with us, Jesus knows us by name and calls some of us to shepherd more of us on our journey.

It has been said: "*the devil knows us by our name and calls us by our sins; Jesus knows us by our sins, but calls us by our name*". "*They will never be lost*"³, it's very reassuring because just like the rocky terrain of Judea, there's many a nook and cranny where a sheep could become entrapped or strangled. "*no one will ever steal them from me*"⁴, "*no one can steal from the Father*"⁵ – "*the Father and I are one*"⁶. Wolves and hyenas were the predators in Judea; today we must beware of wolves wearing lamb's clothing!

What John Sullivan wore is well remarked on. Handsome, well-dressed and charming, he was I have no doubt considered a desirable matrimonial catch. In 1896, the thirty-five year old barrister was received into the Catholic Church at London's Farm Street Jesuit Community and began a journey of leaving all that behind him. It mightn't always have been his first choice. Fergal McGrath speaking in his authoritative work on John Sullivan says: "*John Sullivan's first leanings were towards the Franciscan Order, no doubt owing to his love of poverty. He frequently visited the Capuchin Friary at Church Street*"⁷.

² *ibid*

³ Jn. 10:28

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Jn. 10:29

⁶ Jn. 10:30

⁷ McGrath, Fergal SJ: '*Fr. John Sullivan S.J.*', 1941, pg. 69

Speaking at his Beatification Ceremony, two years ago tomorrow, the principal celebrant and homilist Cardinal Angelo Amato referred to the testimonial letters and documents that make up the *Positio* for Blessed John Sullivan's cause, running to close to 700 pages. I have seen in that ream of documents and testimonials of people who saw John Sullivan as "a poor man among the poor"; "the personification of the spirit of poverty". While he came from a wealthy and well-endowed background, once he became a religious he was oblivious to comforts and contented himself with that which was purely necessary. So how did John Sullivan hear God's call? How did he make that transition in his personal life? How did he and how do any of us hear it on this Good Shepherd Sunday?

While he was the successful lawyer, a man of the world and indeed well-travelled, he always had that deep desire to dedicate himself to a more profound holiness. His travels brought him to Greece, where he no doubt considered the monastic life of prayer on Mount Athos. In his legal work around Ireland, among the convents he visited were the Poor Clares in Carlow who had just arrived from Manchester in 1893. When they moved to their new convent in 1900 from their early house at Graigue Bridge, John was then very familiar with them and came down to Carlow for the occasion. He served four farewell Masses there, presenting them with a gold ciborium and a Sacristans Manual. Apparently the sacristan of the day had reproached John Sullivan for some minor misdemeanour, maybe he missed ringing the bell at the proper time, but you couldn't but feel here was John Sullivan getting his own back!

McGrath and many others would suggest it was the prayers of his mother which ultimately honed his conversion to Catholicism and his vocation to priesthood: "*It is quite certain, however, that the prayers and example of his mother played a powerful part in his conversion*"⁸. Pope Francis often tells us of the importance of the prayers and intentions of parents and grandparents. In his message for World Day of Prayer for Vocations a few years back he said "*behind and before every vocation to the priesthood or to the consecrated life there is always the strong and intense prayer of someone: a*

⁸ *ibid*, pg. 64

grandmother, a grandfather, a mother, a father, a community ... vocations are born in prayer and from prayer; and only through prayer can they persevere and bear fruit”⁹.

I don't need to remind you we have entered a critical phase in the promotion and pursuing of a vocation to the priesthood or religious life in the Ireland of today. The Lord has not stopped calling young people to serve Him in the priesthood, Pope Francis reminds us in his recent exhortation *Christus Vivit* that he regularly brings this subject up with young people “*and they would respond almost jokingly ‘No, that’s not for me!’. Yet a few years later, some of them were in the seminary”¹⁰*. As Bishop of Kildare & Leighlin I am very anxious to do all I can to encourage and nurture vocations.

The best advertisement is the priest who is present in the parish, available, kind and encouraging and I hugely thank our priests for their presence with their people in times of greatest brokenness and pain. The last few decades have been painful and challenging; the scar of clerical sex abuse still sears our church and dents our morale. The last few decades have also had their times of great fulfilment and joy since my late mother sewed those name tags onto socks going into seminary. I don't see this as a crisis time but an opportunity, where lay people support their priest, stepping into leadership roles allowing him to be that pastor and shepherd.

The Cross of Blessed John Sullivan continues to be that instrument that attracts so many still to his healing and intercession. I think of the couple who wrote to me from a neighbouring parish to here late last year and the issues around their pregnancy. Their son was later baptised here in Clongowes. They fully attribute the success of that pregnancy, against all medical odds, and the health of their little son today to Blessed John Sullivan's intercession. He continues to heal, just as the Shepherd continues to call. May we heed both this day. Amen.

⁹ Pope Francis Message for World Day of Prayer for Vocations

¹⁰ *Christus Vivit*, ¶274