

## Easter 4, Year C

April 17, 2016

*John 10:22-30 At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. 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. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."*

To begin to grasp the meaning of today's Gospel passage, we need, first, to pay attention to the setting; for as we found out last week, John offers clues to the meaning of his Gospel stories in describing the setting of the story. Our passage begins: "*At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon.*" We need first to ask, "What **is** the festival of the Dedication?" In the Hebrew language, the word for "dedication" is "Hanukkah", which celebrates the cleansing and rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem by Judas Maccabeus in 164 B.C. after the Hellenistic King of Syria had plundered the Jewish Temple and set up in the Temple an altar to Zeus.

As our story begins, Jesus is walking in the **Temple**, in the Portico of Solomon (who built the *first Temple*), during the feast of the Dedication *of the Temple*. In setting the scene, then, John could not be more clear that this passage is going to be about the Temple and the whole Temple religious system! And the statement "It was winter" tells us that Jesus is going to get a chilly reception from the Temple officials.

Now, we know that Jesus had some issues with the Jewish Temple system, a fact that is demonstrated most clearly in his "cleansing of the Temple" – turning over the tables of money-changers and driving out the sacrificial animals – an event which is recounted in all four Gospels. But whereas in Matthew, Mark, and Luke Jesus' cleansing of the Temple occurs just *days* before his crucifixion, in John, Jesus cleanses the Temple at the **beginning** of his ministry! Why does John put the story there, at the beginning? To signal to us readers that Jesus' confrontation with the Temple authorities and the Temple system is going to be central to the meaning of his life and ministry from the very start. In fact, I'm convinced that John's mention of Solomon in his telling of this story (none of the other Gospel accounts mention Solomon's Portico) reminds us readers that God was not all that enthusiastic about letting David or his son Solomon build a temple in the first place. You may remember that when King David had first suggested building a house for God, God had said to David, "No; I will make **you** a house." (2 Samuel

7:11) God was going to make a house for Himself **in** David and his descendants! Only reluctantly did God allow David's son Solomon to build the first Jewish Temple.

Now, throughout Jesus' ministry there had been talk amongst the people that Jesus might be the longed-for Messiah. Even the Samaritan woman whom Jesus meets at the well back in Chapter 4 wonders if Jesus is the Messiah. (John 4:29) So it is not surprising that in today's Gospel, near the end of Jesus' ministry, the leaders of the Temple approach Jesus and ask, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

It is, in essence, the **same** question that the imprisoned John the Baptist had sent his disciples to ask Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" John the Baptist wanted to know. Jesus did not answer John's question, but rather pointed to his works, saying, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." (see Luke 7:18-23) This is, in essence, the same answer Jesus gives to the Jewish leaders in today's Gospel when they ask him if he is the Messiah: "The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me," Jesus says. Feeding the hungry, making the lame walk, giving sight to the blind – these are the works that Jesus has done up to this point in John's Gospel. How could there be a clearer sign of his identity than the witness of his life and works? "By their fruits you will know them," Jesus says elsewhere; and by his own fruits is his *own* identity known! Whether or not people label him "Messiah" is really not Jesus' concern. Later in John's Gospel, Pontius Pilate tries to get Jesus to answer the question of whether he is the "King of the Jews", and Jesus simply says, "You say so." (18:33) Jesus is not interested in whether people call him either "Messiah" or "King."

Episcopal priest Gary Jones writes:

"Jesus' role and identity cannot be reduced to a title; instead, his role and identity must be *experienced*. This becomes clear in the analogy of the sheep and shepherd. The sheep know and trust the shepherd, not because they have gone through any sort of rational, intellectual discernment, but because they have *experienced* the shepherd and his 'works.' In the same way, a child knows and trusts his or her mother because of *experience*, not reason..." (*Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary; Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide*, emphasis mine)

Which brings up the issue of Jesus' use of the word "believe" in today's story. As I have pointed out many times, the Biblical Greek word that is translated "believe" is the **verb** form of the word "faith". Since the English language does not **have** a verb form of the word "faith", the Greek verb is usually translated as either "believe" or "trust". Following several scholars, I am convinced that "trust" is almost *always* the better translation. "Believe" connotes an intellectual assent; "trust" has to do with relationship and putting one's life in another

person's hands. The sheep and shepherd image is helpful, therefore, since clearly "sheep" cannot "believe" in a shepherd, while they **do** *trust* the shepherd's voice, and follow him. The Temple officials want to know *intellectually* whether Jesus is the Messiah, whereas Jesus can only *truly* be known through *experiencing* him and his loving, healing works – like a sheep knows its shepherd.

I think that in many ways, we see a similar situation in Christianity today. All too often, we Christians, like the Temple officials, argue and fight about who believes the right things about God and Jesus, or who worships the right way; whereas if we are Jesus' *sheep*, the question is whether we will listen to and follow him in our own lives. "The early church grew dramatically," writes Fr. Jones, "not because multitudes were convinced of the truth of creeds and dogmas [or because people came to church every Sunday and worshipped the right way], but because multitudes **experienced** the living Lord and a new life" in Him. (*ibid.*, *emphasis mine*)

In John's earlier story of Jesus cleansing the Temple, Jesus tells the Jewish leaders, "Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up." (2:19) When the leaders point out that it had taken forty-six years to build the Temple, the Gospel-writer John tells us that Jesus wasn't speaking of the Temple *building*, but was rather speaking about the Temple of his body. (2:21) The Temple of his body.

Now, for 900 years the Jews believed that God's presence was located in the Temple building in Jerusalem – in the Holy of Holies, to be exact; but in John's Gospel Jesus says that God's presence is located *in himself*. Is this not, after all, what God was saying to King David when he said, "I will make you a house"? That God wanted to reside in and among his people, rather than in a building?

New Testament scholar and Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright, author of the "New Testament for Everyone" series which many of us have used, claims that we have largely missed St. Paul's foundational point in his letters. Paul's main point was not that we are justified by belief in Jesus, as Protestants have often contended; nor is it that we are justified by right worship and observing the sacraments, as Catholics have often asserted. Rather, N.T. Wright believes that "the great and supreme idea of Paul is that the new temple of God is the human person..." [from an unpublished talk by Richard Rohr, Feb. 2015 at CAC]

St. Paul writes to the Corinthians: "Do you not know that **you** are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?... For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple." (1 Cor. 3:16-17) And again Paul writes: "we are the temple of the living God; as God said, 'I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.'" (2 Cor. 6:16) And in Ephesians we read, "In [Christ] the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom **you** also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God." (Ephesians 2:21-22) Note that these statements are in the *present tense*.

“You *are* God’s temple; God’s Spirit *dwells* in you; we *are* the temple of the Living God.” Paul states this as **fact**; we do not have to **make** it so! We only have to realize, to actualize, live out and unfold that fact in our personal and corporate lives. *You and I* are the dwelling place of God! Both John’s Gospel and Paul’s letters make that abundantly clear.

This is not to say that places and things cannot be holy. I do believe that places can be holy. The ancient Celts spoke of “thin places,” places where the veil between this world and the full-blown Kingdom of God is very thin. A church can be made holy by years of prayer within its walls. This is a holy place. But the purpose for its holiness is to resonate with, and draw out, the Spirit of God which is within all of us who enter and pray here.

I do believe that the Holy Bible is indeed a Holy Book. But it is holy because through its words the *living* Word - who is Christ - can enter our minds and hearts and encourage the life of God that is in us to grow and flourish!

I also believe that Christ is, in some very real way, present in the outward form of Holy Communion – the consecrated bread and wine. Because of this, I was taught to genuflect, to kneel or bow before the presence of the consecrated elements on the altar or in the tabernacle; and I have done this for 35 years. But recently, Richard Rohr has persuaded me to change this practice slightly and NOT to genuflect to the consecrated bread and wine on the altar or in the tabernacle *after* I have received communion; because in receiving communion, I have just taken the life of Christ *into myself*, and I am going to take it *with* me out into the world. I haven’t left Christ at the altar or in the tabernacle, that I should turn and bow to him there as I leave the altar rail; He is within me as I leave the altar and go out into the world! You and I are the temple of the living God! Receiving Holy Communion has brought this fact more powerfully into our consciousness, into the light of day; and it has nourished that divine life within us, that we might go forth and share it with the world.

“I will make **you** a house,” God told King David. “**You** are God’s temple,” St. Paul tells us, “God’s Spirit dwells in **you**.” It is a present-tense fact.

So I offer a suggestion to you: When you read Holy Scripture, or hear it read and preached on Sunday, allow it to nourish that Spirit within you and bring it more to your consciousness. When you receive Holy Communion, know that you take it into yourself, and that it becomes the very cells of your body, God’s temple, strengthening the life of Christ in you. And when you get up from the communion rail, try – just once! – to refrain from turning back and bowing to the altar. Go forth from this place “to love and serve the Lord” **knowing** that you *are* God’s Temple and God’s life lives in you – and in every precious child of God you meet.

AMEN