

Easter 4C 2022 Sermon

May 1, 2022

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."

"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." Now, the festival of the Dedication (Hanukkah, in Hebrew) celebrates the physical and spiritual restoration of the Jewish Temple in the year 164 B.C.E. Today's Gospel story begins with Jesus walking in the **Temple**, in the Portico of *Solomon* (who built the *first Temple*), during the festival of the Dedication of the **Temple**. In the first 2 sentences of today's Gospel, then, John makes it clear that this story is going to be about the Temple and the whole Temple system.

Now, by all accounts, the Temple building in Jesus' day was a wonder to behold. The First-Century historian Josephus wrote, "The exterior of the building wanted nothing that could astound either mind or eye. For, being covered on all sides with massive plates of gold, the sun was no sooner up than it radiated so fiery a flash that persons straining to look at it were compelled to avert their eyes, as from the sun's rays."¹

But, as magnificent as the Temple *building* was, the hierarchical Temple **system** of priests, Levites, and other Temple officials was corrupt. Biblical scholars Malina and Rohrbaugh write, "[The Temple] was the center of a redistributive economy in which the economic surplus was effectively drained from the rural areas."² The Jewish people were taught that animal sacrifices were necessary if someone wanted to be in right relationship with God, and the Temple was the *only* place where animal sacrifices could be offered. And only the Temple *priests* could offer those sacrifices. In short, the people were led to believe that right relationship with God could only be achieved through the means of the Temple system and those who controlled it.

Now, the fact that Jesus had *issues* with the whole Temple system is demonstrated clearly in an earlier story, at the beginning of John's Gospel, where Jesus enters the Temple complex, overturns the tables of the moneychangers and drives out the sacrificial animals, while telling those who sold those animals, "Stop making

my Father's house a marketplace!" (John 2:16) A marketplace: a place where God's favor was obtained through the purchase of sacrificial animals sold by Temple merchants at whatever price they chose to charge. Right relationship with God, the people were told, was achieved not through *inner transformation*, but through an *outer transaction* that benefited the Temple officials and merchants while draining the pocketbooks of the poor.

And, my friends, if we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that the history of the Christian Church is filled with similar dynamics. One obvious example is found in the Middle Ages, when Christians were told by the Church hierarchy that if they purchased "indulgences" from the Church, they could assure their own salvation, or the release of the souls of their dead relatives from purgatory. It was because of this distortion of the Gospel, this system of "marketplace salvation," that Martin Luther wrote his 95 Theses, which sparked the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. (But, of course, Protestant Reformers quickly developed their *own* "Temple systems" which determined who was "in" and who was "out.")

Even today, in some segments of Christianity, it is believed that someone becomes "right with God," or is "saved," not by grace, but by meeting certain requirements: having the right beliefs, going to church, answering the altar call, being baptized, reading the Bible; and being *against* certain beliefs and practices and political parties and sexual orientations or what have you. The right boxes need to be checked before one can be right with God. It's the "Temple system" in modern guise: one is "saved" through the currencies of right beliefs, right actions, associating with the right kind of people, and shunning or denouncing the people who are "wrong" or "deviant" or on "the wrong side" of a particular issue.

Now, if the Jews of Jesus' day were led to believe that their personal "salvation" was achieved through the Temple system, they believed that the salvation of the whole Jewish nation would be achieved when God sent a Messiah to deliver the people from the subjugation of the Roman Empire. In today's Gospel story, certain Jews gather around Jesus in the Temple grounds and say, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." But Jesus knows that the *kind* of Messiah that most of his fellow Jews were looking for was someone who – by force, or miracle, or whatever – would drive out the Roman forces occupying their homeland, the land that God had promised to their ancestor Abraham and his descendants. But in reality, Jesus was a totally *different* kind of Messiah – a Messiah who, instead of *overthrowing* the Roman Empire, would allow himself to be *crucified* by the Roman Empire. Jesus knows that a *suffering* Messiah was not something that most Jews – including Jesus' own Disciples! – could process intellectually. And so, Jesus has to tell the people what kind of Messiah he **really** is not with words and explanations but by the example of his life and ministry. Thus, in answer to their demand that he tell them plainly if he is the Messiah, Jesus responds, "I *have* told you, through the works I have been doing among you – the healings and miracles. These works that I do in my

Father's name show you what kind of Messiah I am; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep."

The fact of the matter is, Jesus is really not *interested* in whether or not people give him the label "Messiah." 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,' [and they trust him]. In the same way, a child knows and trusts his or her mother because of *experience*, not reason..."³

Now, you have heard me say many times that the New Testament Greek word translated "believe" can just as validly be translated "trust." When Jesus' interrogators demand, "I you are the Messiah, tell us plainly," Jesus says, "I *have* told you, and you do not trust... because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice... and they follow me."

The sheep and shepherd image is quite helpful, since *clearly* "sheep" cannot "believe" in a shepherd, while they **can** *trust* the shepherd's voice, and follow him. Jesus' Jewish interrogators want to know in their "heads" whether Jesus is the Messiah; but Jesus can only *truly* be **known** *not* through the intellect, but through *experiencing* him and his loving, healing life and works – like a sheep experiences the love of its shepherd.

My friends, all too often, I'm afraid, we Christians argue and fight about who *believes* the right things *about* God and Jesus, or whose "side" Jesus is on regarding any of the polarized issues of our time (and *every* issue seems polarized these days!) But if we are Jesus' *sheep*, the real question is not what we *believe* regarding this or that issue "out there," but whether we *trust* him in here, in our hearts, 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, but because multitudes **experienced** the living Lord and a new life."³

Before his conversion, St. Paul was very much a part of the "Temple system." (Phil. 3:5-6) But after his experience of the risen Christ, all of that changed. The transformed Paul would write 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)

Note that Paul states this as fact, without any condition or contingency. Paul does not say, "You are God's temple *if*...; God's Spirit dwells in you *if* you believe this or that, or *if* you are on such-and-such a side in the most recent political controversy." There is no "if," my friends. We **are** God's temple; God's Spirit

dwells in us. Period. All we can do is realize, live out, and be faithful to this divine reality in our personal and corporate lives.

Jesus did not come to *destroy* that magnificent Jewish Temple, but to replace it. For Jesus showed us by his example, his teaching, and by pouring out his life on a cross that the dwelling place of God is not a building of stone and gold, but the temple of the human heart.

AMEN

1 <https://www.ritmeyer.com/2015/12/14/the-gold-of-the-jerusalem-temple/>

2 Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998, p. 74

3 *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary; Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide*, electronic version, emphasis mine