

The Fourth Sunday of Easter  
St. John 10:22-30

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

As the Gospel lesson begins, Jesus was strolling on Solomon's porch in the temple courtyard. It was the Feast of Dedication, a time you might know better as Hanukkah. By this time, Jesus had become pretty well-known: He was the man who taught with authority and healed all manner of diseases incurable by the medicine of that time—and perhaps some that today's medicine can't touch either—and cast out all kinds of demons. So, Jesus had acquired a great following and reputation throughout all Judea.

The time, location, situation, and reputation all lead up to the question the Jews ask Him: "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." "Why are you keeping us in suspense? We know who you are. We've seen and heard of what you've done. Why don't you just come out and say it, you're the Christ, the Anointed One...the Messiah." To understand what they were asking and demanding of Jesus, you have to understand what they were expecting of Him.

Like I said, the time, location, situation, and reputation all lead up to the question they ask Him:

- The time was Hanukkah, the Feast of Dedication. It was a commemoration when the temple was rededicated after the defilements of Antiochus IV of Syria, who had been a ruler of Judea in the line of the Seleucids following the death of Alexander the Great. You might recall from some study or class or history program on Alexander the Great that following his death, his empire was divided among three of his generals whose descendants ruled those regions: the Ptolemids in Egypt, the Antigonids in Greece, and the Seleucids in the Middle East and Asia. Antiochus IV thought himself enlightened, taking the epithet Epiphanes, and in his "enlightenment" thought the Jewish religion ridiculous to the point of outlawing its practice and defiling the temple. The Jews revolted, took over Jerusalem, and rededicated the temple, but only had enough oil to burn in their lamps for one day—this oil miraculously lasted eight.
- The location, then, follows. Jesus was surrounded as he walked on Solomon's porch on the temple grounds. This was the very same temple that was rededicated following the recapture of Jerusalem.
- The situation is that the Jews found themselves under the rule of another outside government, another outside ruler. It wasn't long after the Seleucids were overthrown that the Romans came in and took over control of the region. While the Romans didn't forbid Judaism, they did allow it with the caveat that homage be paid to Caesar as would be given to a king, and not merely a king as you would view a king, but a king that was placed in power by the will of the gods—their gods. Never mind that the Jews also didn't like paying taxes to Rome.
- Finally, the reputation that Jesus had acquired was that which is something that was expected of a messiah. This reputation is deeply connected with the time and situation. It was during the reign of the Seleucids at the time that is called the "Inter-Testamental Period" that the Jews rose up, led by a family known as the Maccabees. Their exploits can be read about in the Apocryphal books known by that name. The Maccabees were charismatic leaders and won a great victory over an occupying force, freeing the Jews to live in the grace of the one, true God. Such were the events in the Maccabean revolt, that many thought them to be the messiah, especially Judas Maccabeus, who won a victory over Nicanor which liberated Jerusalem and the temple, allowing the Jews to restore the temple.

So, the elements were perfectly set up for the Jews to ask Jesus, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." In other words, "How long are you going to take to act? If you are the Messiah, tell us and get to work. Throw the Roman rulers out so that we can rightly and fully take up living in God's grace." As you no doubt have guessed by now, their idea of what the Messiah was and what he was supposed to do was skewed by their view of history. They thought the Messiah was supposed to be a political hero, someone who would restore the nation of Israel, who

would inevitably cause the restoration of the right religion. Everything would be set right under his rule, and life could go on as it is supposed to, as God had intended it to.

Jesus had the resume to back up their assumption. He was certainly a charismatic leader and teacher. He did things that were miraculous, keeping in line with the miracle which confirmed Judas Maccabeus to be messiah-like. Jesus' reputation was in line with their recollection of the Maccabean history.

"Look, Jesus, you certainly act like a Maccabee, so you must be the Messiah. Tell us and go all the way."

Therefore, Jesus responded,

I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one.

"I told you, and you do not believe." Jesus had told them that He was the Messiah yet they refused to believe. He claimed to be the Christ, yet the Romans still ruled Judea. He referred to His reputation, works that He did in His Father's name. These are the very same works that the Law and the Prophets wrote of by which the Messiah could be identified. Oh, to be sure, some of them resembled the works done by the Maccabees, but not all of them, nor some of them fully. But in Christ, they are all fulfilled or will be fulfilled.

And this is the end, the purpose, of His work as Messiah: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand." He speaks, and His sheep follow. His Word gives them eternal life, and no one can take that away from them.

Yet they did not believe because they were not His sheep. He is very much the Christ, but not the Christ they had in mind. He was not keeping them in doubt; they were keeping themselves in doubt. They wanted the Christ to be in the vein of Judas Maccabeus—the conquering hero, as Handel called him. Jesus called Himself the Christ by pointing to His Works and the Scriptures which paints a different picture of the Messiah—one of being a gentle shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep.

It was not the will of the Father that the country be restored so that the old religion could be practiced and life go on as it once had. The will of the Father is as Jesus said a few chapters earlier in St. John's Gospel: "And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." (John 6:39-40)

That is complete and full and final restoration. It was not dependent on the restoration of the nation of Israel, nor is it currently dependent on the restoration of any country. It was and is not dependent on the restoration of the temple in Jerusalem nor to the return to any old religion. It is this: "[T]hat everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." It is dependent on the death and resurrection of the Good Shepherd.

"I and My Father are one," Jesus concluded. The Father's will is His will. He was sent as Messiah to do this and be this, and only He could. Only He could because He is God. Judas Maccabeus never could; his will was not that of the Father's. Judas was not God. Judas sought to liberate the country from the Seleucids, a noble deed to be sure, but he could not lay down his life for the people and rise

again for them to bring them complete and full liberty.

This false perception and expectation of a messiah still exists today. Among some modern Jews exists the idea that the messianic age cannot exist without the restoration of the temple, which is currently "defiled" in the form of a Muslim mosque standing on the site. They seek another conquering hero, but not exactly of the same order as Judas Maccabeus. Some will go so far as to state that the Messiah is not supposed to be a person, but an idea or concept that will only be realized with restored temple worship and sacrifices—Judaism the way it once was. Therefore, Jesus is not the Christ and never was.

Even among some modern Christians, so-called, there exists this idea that Israel and the temple must be restored in order for Jesus to return. These seek a conquering hero, too, so that Jesus can complete His task as Messiah. It goes against what Jesus taught as being the will of His Father. It goes against what He said from the cross as He breathed His last: "It is finished." (John 19:30)

There's also a false idea shared by some Christians and non-Christians. There is this notion that Jesus is Messiah to fulfill a person's expectations. The pop group, Depeche Mode, sang a song called "Personal Jesus" which relates to this notion. They sing, "Your own Personal Jesus / Someone to hear your prayers / Someone who's there;" it sounds as if they are singing about a Messiah whose purpose is to fulfill one's desires. In fact, Martin Gore, the song's author, says of the song:

It's a song about being a Jesus for somebody else, someone to give you hope and care. It's about how...everybody's heart is like a god in some way, and that's not a very balanced view of someone, is it?

It's the old "God in a Box" idea.

You could also easily fall into a trap that's related to this "God in a Box" idea. You can speak of Jesus in a way that emphasizes one aspect or quality of His over and against some other, even to the exclusion of another. To do so limits the scope of who the Messiah is and what He does. This reduces the Savior to graspable chunks, as I once heard it described. It makes Him more appealing to certain segments of the population.

For instance, someone struggling to cope with illness will find it easier to grasp Jesus the Great Physician, so you'll have a congregation or group that "ministers" only to the sick, proclaiming a Jesus who can heal diseases while ignoring the rest of who the Messiah is and does. This kind of "ministry" leaves them empty with regard to salvation. Or there is the group which proclaims Jesus the Defender of the Poor and Downtrodden and nothing else, or the Jesus who helps fight addictions and nothing else. The list can go on and on. These proclamations are devoid of salvation. While there is a place for Jesus the Great Physician, Defender of the Poor and Downtrodden, Destroyer of Addiction, and so on, these should never be proclaimed to the exclusion of Jesus the Messiah, who is Savior for eternity, especially because sometimes, in His role as Savior, He doesn't heal your disease right now or bring you out of poverty or cure your addiction, etc.

So, while Jesus is all of these things, to be sure, recall what Jesus said: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand." Earlier He had also said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (John 10:11) His Words are life, and He gives His life for all; those who follow Him, the Good Shepherd, have eternal life.

Follow Jesus only as Destroyer of Addiction, and there is no death and resurrection there. Follow Jesus only as Defender of the Poor and the Downtrodden, and there is no death and resurrection there. Follow Jesus only as Great Physician, and there is no death and resurrection there. Make Jesus a "Personal Messiah," and there is no death and resurrection there; logical Old Adam doesn't like that...doesn't understand that. Seek in Jesus only a conquering hero, and you miss the Messiah mark entirely.

But, that's why you gather here—why you are gathered here. You are gathered here by the Good Shepherd, sheep of the Good Shepherd, to hear His voice, to hear His Words. You are gathered to hear of the Good Shepherd's life, death, and resurrection. Because here the Good Shepherd's voice is speaking to you.

Some years ago, I was asked if it feels like someone else is talking when I speak in my role as pastor. While I hear the sound of my voice, it does most certainly feel like someone else is talking. I am, simply put, a mouthpiece for God. Certainly, my personality comes through as I preach to you, but what I have to say is not from me but from God, and I need to hear it as much as you do. Now, don't misunderstand me; I'm not saying that these words are inspired by God, as the books of the Bible are, but that as an under-shepherd of the Good Shepherd, I have been given a message to preach: of sin and forgiveness, of death and resurrection, of Law and Gospel—a message drawn from those inspired texts. This message is the voice of the Good Shepherd, and you and I are gathered to hear it.

And in hearing His voice, you receive exactly what He says, for His Word is life, and it is forgiveness and salvation. He speaks, and His Word does exactly what He says. He speaks of forgiveness and life and salvation and gives them when He speaks and through means—Word, Sacrament, and Office. Jesus said that the words that He has spoken are spirit, and they are life. (cf. John 6:63) "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

And here's the kicker. As the Good Shepherd is preached, the Great Physician and Defender of the Poor and Downtrodden and Destroyer of Addiction follow. The Good Shepherd gives His life for the sheep; He gives His life to the sheep. Spiritual and physical healing are a part of God's plan for His children, if not for the here and now, certainly in the life to come; therefore, if Christ crucified is preached, Christ the Great Physician, Christ the Defender of the Poor and Downtrodden, and Christ the Destroyer of Addiction is included (as is every other quality of the Messiah). Moreover, if Christ crucified is preached, so is Christ the Conquering Hero, for by His death and resurrection He has conquered the devil, the world, and your own sinful flesh. By His death He has destroyed death, and by His rising against He has restored to you everlasting life.

Therefore, dear sheep of the Good Shepherd, hear his voice: Christ was crucified for you, died with your sin that you may live eternally without sin. Christ is risen for you, lives again that you may be where He is. He is your Good Shepherd, your Great Physician, your Defender, the Destroyer of your addiction, your Conquering Hero, therefore, you are forgiven for all of your sins!

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.