

“Fighting Words” - John 10:22-30 – Apr 21, 2013

There is so much of scripture that we miss on first reading. I know, I know, I say this a lot, and maybe it's just a characteristic of John's gospel, but still it's true that we miss a lot unless we dig deeper. For example, in today's reading I think we miss or ignore the opening details that John uses to paint a complex and informative picture for us and instead move immediately to the dialogue. Soon after, our eyes glaze over a bit. Finally, we nod sagely when we hear the concluding statement, and feel good that we recognize the passage because of how it ended.

Now if this is one of your favourite texts, and you have examined it and remember it fondly in all of its detail, then I hope I haven't offended you with my general analysis of how people respond to it. But I suspect like me most of you would normally have to reach for the bible again if someone were to ask you some details about the opening of this incident. That's OK – life is pretty much an “open book” test; go ahead and reread the passage while we look at it.

“At that time” John begins, and if we're hearing with clear ears we will instinctively ask, “what time?”, and the answer is right there: “In winter, at the Feast of the Dedication.” We know this feast by a different name – Hanukkah – and when we hear that name many of us will associate the time as being around Christmas, and of course for us thought of Christmas lead to thoughts of Jesus' birth. Of course the word ‘Christmas’ had not yet been coined so John couldn't use the term, but still the reference to the time of year leads us to a powerful connection ... John is talking about Jesus, the one born on that first Christmas day, and we already have set in our minds the understanding of him to be the Son of God long before we see that to be the question dealt with in his conversation with the Jews.

But even in doing so we still usually miss an important implication from the setting that John's original readers would catch. The Feast of the Dedication, or Hanukkah, was the religious festival that celebrated the victory of the Maccabean Jews over the Syrians about 160 BC, a victory that brought about the recapture and recovery of the temple in Jerusalem. It also celebrates the consecration of the altar which had been profaned by the Syrians (by slaughtering pigs on that altar). Through this imagery of recapturing a right relationship with God, John sets our minds of his readers (or at least the early ones) into a mindset of connecting Jesus with the act of recapturing a right relationship with God.

And so right in the first sentence we are already moved into remembering Jesus' unique and holy birth and are mentally connecting him with the re-establishment of a right relationship with God. But there's more. Jesus is not only walking in the very temple that was recaptured and restored, he is walking in the portico of Solomon. Even though it doesn't have anything like the same impact for us as it did for the first readers, the name ‘Solomon’ still evokes an image of the wisest king ever to rule over the people of Israel, and a connection is established in our minds between Jesus and this wisest king.

The scene is now set. In that first sentence, we are moved to remember Jesus' holy birth, to connect him not only with the restoration of the temple and thus true faith to Israel, but also with the wisest king ever to be gifted by God upon the people of Israel. We are primed and ready, and thus when the question is asked of Jesus by the Jews, “If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly”, we are gathered in the background with all the faithful chanting, “yes! yes!” It's obvious to us what the answer is.

But we should have a bit of compassion for those who were asking the question of Jesus and for whom the answer was much less obvious. Where we have a post-resurrection faith,

founded on the accounts and testimony of Jesus risen victorious over death, those who questioned him in the temple did not have that advantage before the fact. But as he pointed that out to them they could, if they were willing and able, still see God at work in Jesus. “I have told you”, he answered them directly. “The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me”, he proclaimed, finishing with an even more direct answer, “The Father and I are one.” How much more direct and clear could he be than that?

But they were not ready to accept that answer. They could not even accept that answer. It was too disturbing, blasphemous even! Imagine, claiming to be one with God. Those were fighting words. To have someone claim to be one with God went against everything they ever believed in. Besides, it wasn’t what they meant by Messiah. Their expectations were totally different. They were looking for something else, someone else.

That’s part of the challenge we face today, also, isn’t it – that people are expecting something else in the way of a Messiah. Some search for salvation within themselves, convinced that there is an inherent good in humanity that is being held down by other factors, a good that simply needs to be liberated so that all can live in peace and harmony. Some search for a Messiah with the power of a Minister of Public Safety, who can finally impose all the rules and laws of morality and goodness and make sure peace and harmony reigns supreme, and is willing to incarcerate people until only those who are peaceful and harmonious walk the streets. Others turn to chemical Messiahs in both liquid and pill forms, seeking a bliss that can be obtained ‘on demand’, only to realize too late that instead of discovering freedom they have become enslaved to a new set of demons. And sadly, many walk with Jesus in today’s modern porticos, still expecting a Messiah who will intervene in the events of history for them and for them alone, turning events to satisfy their particular desires and wants and needs. They can be identified as those who still challenge Jesus, although with more modern language “If you are the Messiah, show us plainly by making sure our team wins, that we are victorious over all others, that you would bless us and not them.”

“I have told you”, Jesus answers clearly. And he has told us, with his mighty deeds done in the Father’s name, making the lame walk, the blind see, the leper clean, the dead rise again. He has told us in his deeds of compassion and mercy, reminding sinners and saints alike of their worth in God’s eyes. He has shown his oneness with the Father of all nations by reaching out to Jew and foreigner alike, female and male, young and old, rich and poor.

But he also told them – and us – that in order to be able to see these deeds as evidence of his oneness with God there must be a willingness, an ability to hear his voice and to recognize him as the Great Shepherd. For those who stand back, arms folded, demanding proof, no proof will ever be enough. And it’s not only those who are defiantly hostile who miss out. For example there are many today who, like in a Facebook cartoon one of my colleagues reposted, cannot hear the Shepherd calling because of the MP3 player earbuds in their ears or who are too busy texting about themselves. However, for those who are willing to be open, to hear, to believe, the revelation of God in Christ will be clear.

That’s where choice comes in. The grace and mercy of God are there, clearly shown in the life, the mighty deeds, and most importantly in the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus. Those who choose to see that power of God in Jesus become his sheep, accept him as the Messiah, the Christ, and become part of his flock, inseparable from him and gifted with eternal life. It’s a gift of grace from God, freely available to all, but like a true gift it is not forced upon us, we must choose to accept it.

It's also true that not everyone who heard this message chose to believe. Indeed, so many were intensely angered by what was clearly to them blasphemy of the worst order – a mere human claiming to be one with God – that they tried to kill him, but were not successful. Eventually he would offer up his life, but even in that he was displaying his response to the directive from above, as shown by his rising again from death victorious in the power of God. But even that was not enough proof for those who had already chosen not to believe, and it is still not enough proof today for those who choose not to believe. It is a sadness, and it is hard for us to understand and accept, but it is also a truth, that not all will choose to believe in Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah.

Nevertheless, that is no reason for us to sit back and say, “they should listen!” Indeed, it is all the more reason why we should help others to see his mighty deeds at work in us, to see how we have been touched and changed by becoming part of his flock, to help them hear the Shepherd's voice. It is definitely easier for others to hear that voice if our bleating changes from “meeee” to “us”, or from “baaaad” to “loved”. It's our obligation to help the other sheep hear his voice – it's your choice whether you will.

But know that by helping others to hear his voice, to see in his mighty deeds done in the Father's name, to acknowledge his oneness with God demonstrated in his resurrection, we are helping them also hear and accept the gift, the assurance, the promise, the affirmation of life, life abundant, life eternal, life in the presence of God, assured by our Great Shepherd, who is One with the Father. All thanks to God for his mercy and his grace offered so freely to us in that same Great Shepherd, Christ Jesus, our Lord.