

A QUESTION OF IDENTITY

Acts 9. 36-43

Revelation 7. 9-17

John 10. 22-30

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

According to our gospel text, it is the time of the festival of Dedication in Jerusalem. This might seem to be just a small detail to us, and indeed we may overlook it entirely, given that just a few verses earlier in St John's gospel, our Lord had been speaking during the Feast of Tabernacles. The Feast of the Tabernacles, as you will remember, commemorated God's caring for his people while they were in the desert following their escape from Egypt.

But the Feast of the Dedication was different. First of all, it occurred three months after the Feast of the Tabernacles, which meant that it happened during the winter;¹ and secondly, the Feast of the Dedication had a very specific purpose. This celebration commemorated the rededication of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem in 164 BCE, following a long period during which the Jews were governed by a man called Antiochus IV, a Greek king who ruled over Syria and southern Asia Minor. This man was known for attempting to extend Greek culture and influence in Israel. He deposed the rightful Jewish high priest and sold the priesthood to the priest's brother, Joshua, who decided to take the Greek name 'Jason'. A gymnasium was built in Jerusalem (1 Macc 1. 11-13), and Jewish men and boys hid their circumcision as they participated in the events of the gymnasium. In doing this, they disowned the sign of the Jewish covenant with God.

¹ The Feast of the Tabernacles was celebrated in September/October; the Feast of the Dedication was celebrated in December.

Antiochus, who now wanted to be called by the Greek name ‘Epiphanes’ (‘the manifest God’) decreed that all people, including the Jews, should worship Zeus Olympios, so that the Jewish people would ‘forget all the law and change the ordinances’ (1 Macc 1. 49; cf. vv 41-50). Any opposition on the part of the Jews would lead to persecution and death (1 Macc 1. 60-64; cf. 1. 56-58).

In 167 BCE, a sacrifice to Zeus was offered in the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, on a pagan altar built over the altar of burnt offerings. The Jews called this altar the ‘desolating sacrilege’ (1 Macc 1. 59; Dan 11. 31).

These events led to a revolt by a Jewish priest, Mattathias. Through a remarkable series of events and circumstances, Mattathias’ son Judas Maccabeus eventually defeated Syrian forces. Judas’ first task was the purification of the Jewish Temple. The ‘desolating sacrilege’ was torn down and a new altar of burnt offerings was erected. The Temple area was rebuilt and refurbished. Lamps were set up to illuminate the sacred ground once again, marking the restoration of Temple order (1 Macc 4. 46-51; cf. 2 Macc 10. 1-14). The Jewish Temple was finally rededicated three years after its defilement. After that, this event was commemorated each year in the Feast of the Dedication.²

The Feast of the Dedication (also known today as the Jewish festival of Hanukkah) focussed on God’s ongoing care of the Jews in the restoration of the Temple, where God dwelt amongst his chosen people. The Feast of the Dedication also called the Jewish people to remain steadfastly faithful to the law of their God and to never again blaspheme the Holy One of Israel and lead others into idolatry.

² Curiously, the Feast of Dedication could be celebrated away from Jerusalem because it was not one of the pilgrimage feasts.

In our gospel text appointed for today, Christ stands on the portico of Solomon³ during the Feast of the Dedication. The 'Jews' (or the members of the Jewish religious establishment) have gathered round him. Their question to our Lord continues along the same line of the debates we have read about earlier in St John's gospel, during the Feast of Tabernacles. Earlier, the 'Jews' disputed amongst themselves about whether Jesus had Messianic credentials; but now they ask him the question directly. Their question, however, is ironic: 'How long will you keep us in suspense? ...Tell us plainly?'

The debate about Christ's Messiah-ship has already been dealt with earlier in chapter 10 by our Lord's revelation of himself as the Good Shepherd (10. 14-18). Three months later, the 'Jews' are still asking how long they must wait. They have already been told plainly that Jesus is the Christ; but they will not listen to him.

Since the 'Jews' will not listen to Christ, he asks them to look to his works done in the name of the Father. These works give transparent witness to our Lord's claims. Even though the 'Jews' have not listened to Jesus' use of the Good Shepherd image (10. 1-18) to address their queries, he returns to this same image to explain why the 'Jews' are unable to accept him as the revelation of God. They do not belong to his sheep and thus are unable to accept his word, or to see the revelation of God in his deeds. Neither are they able to believe that he is the Messiah. The sheep of the Good Shepherd hear his voice and respond to it; but the 'Jews' do not. They cannot belong to his flock.

The image of the sheep of the Good Shepherd, who hear his voice and follow him so that he may give them eternal life and so that they may never be lost, is a wonderful image of us who are true believers. A believer 'hears'; a believer has 'eternal life'; a believer 'follows' Christ; and a believer 'is not lost'. Belief in our Lord

³ This was located on the eastern side of the Temple and was the most protected of the Temple precincts in winter.

as the Messiah will bring life, and no-one can snatch these believers from him. The sheep cannot be snatched away from Jesus because the life that the believers receive is a gift of the Father. No-one has greater power than God does, and therefore the believer's union with God is assured. The Father is greater than all other powers.

As Israel celebrated God's historic and on-going presence at the Feast of the Dedication in Jerusalem, Christ tells the 'Jews' that there is another way in which God is present to them. They can be sure that they are in the Father's hand if they believe in our Lord. In celebrating the Feast of Dedication, the 'Jews' prided themselves on their reconstructed Temple, the physical evidence of their belonging to God. But Jesus now insists that faith in his word ties the believer not only to him, but also to God the Father.

Christ's affirmation in verse 30 continues this theme: 'I and the Father are one'. There is no longer any need to look at the physical building on the Temple Mount to know that God is present with his people. Our Lord, who stands on the Temple portico before 'the 'Jews'', points to himself and claims that *he* is the visible expression of God among them. In the Jewish expectation, no Messiah could ever claim to replace the Temple; but that is what Jesus does here. The promise of the first chapter of St John's gospel (Prologue) is acted out in the story of Christ: 'And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.'

This is not a study in metaphysics, but a statement of the oneness of purpose that unites the Father and the Son; a oneness of purpose that is created by a union of love and obedience. Our Lord's words, set in the Feast of Dedication, indicate that the union between God and his people that was symbolised by the Father's presence in the Temple in Jerusalem, is now perfected in Jesus because of his oneness with the Father.

Today, we have seen that the identity of Christ was clearly explained to the 'Jews', as was the identity of his sheep. We might do well to ask ourselves this morning, 'what is my primary identity?' Do we know for certain that we are sheep?

Amen.