

FROM HANUKKAH TO EASTER

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.

How puzzlingly out of place today's Gospel passage appears! Out of place, because for the past three Sundays, since Easter Day, we have been reading from the post-resurrection accounts of the Risen Lord appearing to his disciples. Today, however, we are brought back, via St John's gospel, to the conclusion of our Lord's public ministry, to the time preceding the events of his Passion. Jesus is in Jerusalem, and he is at the Temple for the Feast of Dedication

The Feast of Dedication is still celebrated by the Jews, but under a different name. It is now called Hanukkah. So I wonder, what does Hanukkah have to do with Easter, and why do we have this passage appointed for today? We shall get to that in a moment.

The Feast of Dedication was a memorial to the purification and re-dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem by Judas Maccabeus in December, 165 BC, after its desecration three years earlier by King Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) of Syria, whose kingdom was an offshoot of the conquest of the Middle East by Alexander the Great. In one of the most traumatic episodes in Jewish history, Antiochus captured Jerusalem, plundered the Temple treasury, and sacrificed a female pig to Zeus on the Temple Altar, which was then re-named for the Greek god.

The act entered the annals of infamy and became what the Scriptures call the ‘abomination of desolation’.¹ Judas (or Judah) of the great Maccabee family (the name means ‘hammer’ by the way), succeeded in an extraordinary defeat of Antiochus’s much larger army and in liberating the Jewish people. He is a worthy subject for Georg Friedrich Haendel’s oratorio which is named after him; and for the great march, *See, the Conquering Hero Comes!*

Now that we understand this bit of history, we encounter Jesus in the tenth chapter of John’s gospel. He was walking and teaching in the outer section of the Temple, called Solomon’s Porch or Colonnade. From it, you could see the deep Kidron Valley to the east; and such sights as the Garden of Gethsemane on the hill opposite and the road that Christ would take from Bethany into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. It is in this setting that our Lord taught about a very different sort of conquering hero and a very different sort of army, the Good Shepherd and his sheep.

In response to hostile questions about his identity (‘Are you the Messiah, or not?’) Jesus evokes the image of himself as God’s Shepherd and of his followers as his sheep. This Shepherd is every bit as much a conquering hero as Judas Maccabeus, yet with a difference. He lays down his life for his sheep, but not as a military leader. Instead he is the Lamb of God who is also the Shepherd; or to put it another way, the Victim who is also the Priest.

Throughout his ministry, Christ avoided politics and eschewed political ambitions, but he respected the role of the State and of Caesar as necessary powers given by his Father. Our Lord did not use force to defend himself, although he had good words for soldiers and military people.

¹ Cf Dan 9:27, 11: 31, 12: 11; Mt 24: 1-3, 15-21.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus also had many things to say about temples and religion. At the end of the day, said Christ, physical temples were not necessary for the worship of God; although he did call the Temple in Jerusalem his Father's house and a place of prayer for all people.² Destroy this temple, said our Lord (referring to the temple of his body), and in three days I will raise it up.³ In other words, Jesus is the true temple of worship of the Father in spirit and in truth;⁴ he is the Head of the Body, the living Body of Christ, of which his sheep are the members. Church buildings, no matter how beautiful (and St Stephen's is an excellent example), are homes for the Body of Christ; but only for the time being.

Let us, with our Lord, give all due respect to the State and the armed forces, and to the temple and religion. But the governance of Jesus the Good Shepherd far exceeds that of any earthly ruler. His protection and security are far more profound than anything that armed forces can provide. And his worship of God is far deeper and beyond any religious expression of rhetoric or ceremony; and it is beyond any church building.

The Good Shepherd who is also the Lamb of God, takes away sin; by his death he overcomes death; and by his resurrection he reveals to his flock the nature of eternal life. The sheep that belong to him are characterised by the fact that they can hear his voice; they can recognise who he is; they can give their allegiance to him; and they can follow where he leads. To be one of his sheep is a gift of God; no one, said Christ, can come to him 'unless my Father draws him'.

And that gift, which seems so utterly gracious, is also the basis of all our security. Since it is a gift of God, no one, and no power in the world can snatch the sheep from the Good Shepherd: 'My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow

² Cf. Mt 21. 13, Mk 11. 17.

³ Cf. Jn 2. 19.

⁴ Cf. Jn 4. 23.

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...I and the Father are one.’ Furthermore, the Lamb of God, who is God’s Good Shepherd, has even pioneered the way through the valley of the shadow of death; he will guide his sheep from this world into the next, guide them to living water, and wipe away every tear.⁵

The image of the Shepherd and the sheep brings with it wonderful promises for those of us who believe. Jesus insists that belief in him on his terms will bring life; life that is eternal and cannot be snatched away by any person, power or principality. The life we receive cannot be taken away because it is from Jesus’s Father, and no power is greater than God. Our union with God is assured. The deliverance that Israel had through the agency of such a hero as Judas Maccabeus was marvellous; as was (even more so) the Exodus by the hand of Moses; but these are only prototypes and shadows of the greatest deliverance of all: the deliverance from sin and death, a Passover from our spiritual prison into a kingdom of grace and freedom. As glorious as a visible temple can be, a church building testifies to a far greater reality; namely that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, Emmanuel, God-with-us, who is the Shepherd and Pastor of our souls and who calls us to be with him.

This unbreakable union with God through Christ is Jesus’s Easter gift to us. When we celebrate the Eucharist shortly, listen carefully to the preface, which says that Christ is ‘our paschal sacrifice (who) has made us children of the light...His death is our ransom from death, his resurrection is our rising to life.’ Then taste and see the fruit of his victory in the sign of Holy Communion, for his flesh is food indeed, and his blood is drink indeed; those who truly eat and drink it, dwell in him and he in them. This is the eternal life that cannot be snatched away; it is for us to treasure here and now, and in the world to come. Amen.

⁵ Cf. Rev 7. 17.