

St Peter's, Ealing
Sunday 17th April 2016
Easter 4 YrC

"If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly"

John's Gospel begins with a clear statement of the nature of Jesus. The Word made flesh, the Word that was in the beginning. The gospel writer is clear that the Word is not John the Baptist, as John testified to the Word also. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, the glory as of the father's only son. So our gospel writer is clear from the outset who Jesus of Nazareth is. It is this truth he spends the rest of the Gospel telling us. He tells us in the story of Jesus at the wedding in Cana (2.1ff); in the calling of Philip and Nathaniel (1.43ff), in the discussion Jesus has with the Samaritan woman at the well (4.26), in the healing of the blind man (9.35). John is not a great teller of miracle stories. His main interest is the story of Jesus and his identification as the Son of God. For John, it is through this identification that salvation comes.

In today's Gospel passage the story of identification continues and is a little puzzling. Earlier in the gospel (John 8.59) we are told the authorities were trying to kill Jesus, even as he taught the people. Before that in chapter 7 Jesus had to leave because the people wanted to pronounce him king. Now Jesus returns again to the temple to teach. Still the people can't make up their minds who or what Jesus is. They ask the question: "How long will you keep us in suspense?" Yet he has been teaching quite clearly and openly. Jesus asserts this fact that he has been doing these things and the people still don't get it. Why don't they get it? Why don't they understand his relationship to God and place in the scheme of salvation? Because they are not of his fold.

Being part of the fold is to accept Jesus as Saviour. In John 6.68 Peter claims, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." Yet those hanging around in the temple, listening to Jesus teach, as well as to other teachers are not able to express this belief. We are told in Chapter 7.12 there was a lot of confusion about the person of Jesus, ranging from a view that he was a holy teacher to he was a trouble maker. But no one declared the certainty of Peter. So here is an indicator of those Jesus would have considered part of his fold and it was nothing to do with miracles, but as Peter said, it was accepting that Jesus had the words of eternal life.

The effect of being part of that fold is quite powerful. Jesus says those who follow him, who are part of the fold, who accept Jesus as the shepherd of the flock will have eternal life, will never perish. How can this be when we all know life comes to an end?

To begin to understand what that means, we turn then to our two other scriptural passages for today. The first to look at is the story of Tabitha and Peter in Joppa. Tabitha, is a faithful follower of Christ. Her faith is worked out in her ministry to the community through good works and acts of charity. It is significant that Peter is approached by widows. Of the time widows and orphans were the most vulnerable of any community having no one to care for them or protect them. This clearly was part of Tabitha's work. Her needle work would have given work and income to the widows of her community, with her passing, the lives of those who depended upon her are also put at risk. It is through her good works that we have evidence of her faithfulness to Jesus as the Christ. As a member of Jesus' flock the promises of eternity are hers, Peter, in his prayer declares that promise.

A promise made real to her community through her resurrection. This is God's action in the world. Through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has redressed his relationship with creation and has broken through, offering a new order and new understanding of the relationship between the divine and the cosmos of His creating. Now anything in God's name is possible, the blind can see, the lame can walk and the dead can be raised. What is most important though is the witness to Jesus who is the Christ.

In our second reading from scripture we have a different group being identified as part of the fold of God. These are martyrs, those who have died for their faith. The blood referred to is that of their martyrdom. These are not saved individuals but the divine army who have given their lives telling people who Jesus is and witnessing to their allegiance to him and their love of God revealed in him. The palms they carry and the robes they wear are symbols of victory, now they stand before the throne of God, as sheep who have been gathered in by the shepherd, gathered into the safety of the sheepfold.

It is in identifying with Jesus then that we begin to see the route of salvation. Not in miraculous events but in his person and his teaching. For John, Jesus' key teaching is about the relationship of God to Jesus, for through this relationship we can understand everything else. Why Jesus has to go to the cross, what the empty tomb means, how we can then relate directly to God, how we can be made whole in God. All this is only truly possible if we understand the relationship between Jesus as the Son and God, the Father.

This is important for us in that we need to be able to take Peter's words for ourselves. We need to be able to accept Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, as the Holy One of God. Throughout John the discussion is, "who are you Jesus?" The classic is the story of the blind man who, after being healed, is then quizzed by the authorities in chapter 9. He begins by saying Jesus is a good man, then he is a prophet and finally, once driven from the Temple, he is sought out by Jesus and declares "Lord, I believe."

In a world where everyone demands proofs before any decision can be made this is particularly challenging. I think even more so when you think how daft Christian claims are. That a bloke, beaten and humiliated after being followed as a great teacher, was then crucified and died, rising from the dead three days later and two thousand years later is still in heaven, as a human being as well as a divine being, at the right hand of God. The teaching bit is ok. You can take it or leave it but the other stuff?

Peter's words to Jesus still ring out "You have the words of eternal life". Tabitha lived by this truth and the martyrs of heaven died but it. In this day and age what is our position? Do we accept Peter's acclamation of Jesus' status as the Holy One of God? Do we hear Jesus' words of eternal life and follow? Are we Jesus' sheep and is he our shepherd? If we do, then such an acceptance of Jesus has consequences for our own lives. How we live life and how we make choices. Like Tabitha and many Christians like her, faithful followers are called, using Jesus' own commission to Peter, to feed his sheep; to live out our faith and serve God in God's people. We stop asking for signs and proofs, we plainly know who Jesus is. We know him because we have allowed him to enter our hearts. We have received him as our own. Like Jesus himself, we have to allow our works, done in the Father's name, to testify to Jesus, so the world will know that Jesus and the Father are one.