

Are you . . . ?

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Almighty God,
whose Son Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life:
raise us who trust in him,
from the death of sin to the life of righteousness,
that we may seek those things that are above,
where he reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.

Our text may be found in the gospel according to John, chapter 10 and verse 24:

'How long will you keep us in suspense ?
If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.'

Today, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, our reading from John's gospel moves us in spiritual time from The Fourth Sunday of Easter to Hanukkah, the feast of the dedication of the Temple, the Festival of Lights. If you were in Hampstead or Finchley in North London at that time of year in December, running up towards Christmas, then you'd see seven branched candlesticks alight in the windows of Jewish homes, Menorah that commemorate, remember, the miraculous flow of oil that allowed the light in the Temple in Jerusalem to burn not just for one day but for the entire eight days of the festival. Hanukkah also celebrates the triumph of the Jewish nation against the attempt by their then ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes

who wanted to convert the Jews from Judaism to a Greek belief in a pantheon of Gods, a polytheism to which he was personally and culturally committed.

Earlier in chapter 10, Jesus has been teaching about the flock, the shepherd, the sheep, and what it means for him to state 'I am the good shepherd' (v11) and 'I am the gate for he sheep' (v7). Now, here, sheltering from the cold, December weather under the Portico of Solomon in the Temple, Jesus is asked a hard, direct question which is our text today:

'How long will you keep us in suspense ?

If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.'

Put simply, these particular Jews are asking Jesus to say yes or no, to state one way or the other that he is or he is not the Messiah that everyone wants to come to restore the Kingdom to Israel.

Sadly, the question by them at this time and in this place is loaded. It's like a gun without a bullet and the bullet which will allow them to fire the gun at Jesus is his answer. If he says yes, then they can go on to get him for blasphemy or sedition against Rome. If he says no, then they can dismiss him, consign him to history as a has-been, an ex-trouble maker. But Jesus does not answer their question directly but instead asks them to make up their own minds, given the evidence of their own eyes and ears.

And Jesus' reluctance to state openly, unequivocally, that he is the Messiah is certainly a theme that runs through Mark's gospel. The evidence is there and it

us up to each one of us to make up our own minds and decide for ourselves. In Jewish terms, Jesus was fulfilling the prophecies about the Messiah – Isaiah’s criteria of the blind seeing; the deaf hearing; the lame walking the leper healed. Above all Jesus taught with authority taking the great Jewish teaching, the Law and the Prophets and casting new light on what it meant to be God’s children, the sheep of his pasture, a surprising, shocking inclusiveness that we are all free to accept or reject.

And that makes me want to ask why these faithful Jews religious men reject Jesus. Jesus answer here is that they are not his sheep because they don’t recognise his voice. Not surprising, really, given he was an outsider, a Galilean from Nazareth, from a poor family, son of Joseph a carpenter, not from a rich, well-connected, well known, priestly family here in Jerusalem nor one of the separatist, righteous Pharisees.

And why do we recognise or fail to recognise him ? I guess I’m lucky that it all made sense to me – given my background, my upbringing, my education – belief in Jesus as God’s Son fitted the hole in my life. Not so much that I was holy but that I had a hole that belief in Jesus could fill !

But why do others fail to recognise him ? I’m guessing because they choose not to; that belief in God, in Otherness, in spirituality, is part of what they rejected as children, youngsters, students. There is no need for anything spiritual in the way these materialists, humanists, atheists make sense of life. Deaf, they can’t hear;

blind they can't see; out of touch, they can't be touched by the presence of God and have no taste for Otherness !

So this morning, with this question, '*Are you the Messiah ?*' , let us reflect that God gives us the space to make up our own mind, make our own choice whether we want to be part of Jesus' flock or go our own way, away from possible salvation he freely offers us.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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G: Sermons 33 :Are you . . .

