

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the musical, *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, King Herod sings, asking Jesus the question in a mocking way: "Who are you, Jesus Christ?"

For two thousand years, the same question has been asked. Who is this Jesus? Is he a great teacher or a fraud? Is he a sage or revolutionary or miracle worker? Is he "just a man," as Mary Magdalene sings in the same musical play while she confronts the same question...or is he something more?

We often imagine that had we lived at the time of Jesus...if we had seen him and heard him, it would have been easier to believe in him. Maybe so, and yet....maybe not.

One of the stunning parts of this gospel reading is its location. It is December, and Jesus is in the Great Second Temple in Jerusalem, walking on the porch or the portico of Solomon on the east side of the Temple. It was called the "Porch of Judgment." From this location, the King would make his judgments and exercise justice for those who were brought before him. So here is Jesus strolling through this historic location, physically embodying justice in this place of justice...something his life and teachings were all about.

And, into this setting, again they ask the identity question: "Hey, Jesus, stop keeping us in the dark. If you are the Messiah, just tell us straight out". My belief is that Jesus is getting pretty tired of these questions. They keep asking, "How long will you keep us in suspense?" Literally: "raise or take away our souls?" But these questioners still do not get it.

This kind of reminds me of children. Children naturally ask some fairly obnoxious questions of parents. Pretty typical kid questions. "Why?" "What does that mean?" "How do you know?" Questions that assert the need to question the reality around that child. It would be nice to say that this need to question authority and test the limits of one's perceived reality stopped at an early age but, like many others, at times we continue to need proof for statements that are made to us.

This is what is happening in this text. Jesus has given the people around him numerous examples of his identity. He has performed miracles and has become the Word made flesh. He has had others question his identity repeatedly, which was normal at the time. Back then, people who taught or prophesied were often asked to give proof of their deeds and the power behind their gift.

But the questions in this passage go beyond that. They are questioning not only his identity but if his power is verifiably from God. As we hear that doubt creep into their questions, we are reminded that doubt is a constant companion to faith. You will notice that, up to this point, it is all about talk. Questions being asked...repeatedly and ad nauseum. "Tell us who you are." "Are you the Messiah?"

His response? Essentially, it is, "I have told you but to no avail. Also, the work that I do in my Father's name you also do not recognize because you are not one of my own." They had heard his words and seen his works, but still did not understand this man before them. After two thousand years, we have the witness of many believers, the stories of many, many wonderful things done in the name of Jesus by his followers. And yet, we also have our doubts and wonder whether these ancient stories have something to say to our post-modern world.

Our faith rests on what we believe but cannot prove...what we claim to confess but cannot explain very well. What is harder to explain than who and what Jesus is or even why we have come to believe in him? Why we would have a relationship with him? Those are the series of very hard questions that we are facing right now in this 21st century. Struggling with it. And why not..because you and I are not used to it. As individual Episcopalians, we are not used to looking hard in the mirror about personal spiritual identity and accountability. This parish, like almost all others, has been preoccupied with getting its feet under it. Maintaining stability. Raising interest and activity. But, as Christians, we are called to love God. The operative words are "love God". There is no escape from it, if we are honest.

The answer from Jesus to the questions in this reading is that as Messiah, Jesus does the same kind of work that God does. In terms of sameness, Jesus is not equal to God in essence, as the later creeds will affirm. But, functionally, Jesus and God the Father function or work in the same way. They are united in the work they do. They both give life, they both judge, and so on. But, he is saying that only those who are attuned to him...his sheep, to use his metaphor...will understand and be able to hear him and understand him.

Eternal life is another theme we find here...a concept that appears at least 17 times in John but few times in other gospels. In John's gospel, eternal life is always related to believing in Jesus, summarized in the well known verse at 3:16. However, now, as we know, eternal life in John's gospel has more to do with quality of life in the present than with extension of life in the future. The one who believes "has" eternal life...present tense "has". The point is: we do not have to wait to enjoy this kind of life, but can have it right now....in the unmistakable message of John's gospel.

Thankfully, Jesus speaks to our dilemma. Jesus simply says that those who believe are those who hear his voice and follow him. They are his sheep...he knows them and he brings them through times of trouble to eternal life...again, not life in the hereafter, but quality of life now for the living. Those who do not love him, who do not believe that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, are somehow not his sheep at all. "My sheep hear my voice," he said, "I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish."

In our own time and place, we probably do not have the intimate, personal experiences of what it is like to be shepherd to sheep. Within that illustration, we probably do not understand the dynamic.

So, let us move away from the shepherd and sheep image into those we ALL know in order to understand the dynamic here. "My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me", he said.

Try to think of it in this way. Who do you know when you hear his or her voice? Well, by now, you have heard my voice long enough to recognize its sound...so perhaps by now you have become so accustomed to the sound of my voice that, if you close your eyes, you still know it is me speaking.

And yet, what I am really talking about is far more than that. Another, deeper question along the same line: Who do you REALLY know by the sound of his or her voice? The distinction is this. There are persons....like your spouse, or child, or other intimate family members who either are alive today or you remember in your heart...where you knew what was in the center of their heart by the sound of their voice. That you could just tell, just as naturally as the sun is shining in the sky today, as to what his or her mood was by the slightest variation of speech in regular conversation. Like trying to hide that she is simmering mad just under the surface. That he is fearful that you have caught him with his hand in the cookie jar. That bursting sense of joy and surprise in a celebratory moment that you will both remember forever. All of that...all...comes from first being in a loving relationship with that person. Coming to know him or her that well...better than anyone else...because of your love.

The parallel that I am trying to draw with these illustrations to the theme for today should be obvious. If as Christians we are in actual relationship with God through Jesus, we will begin to learn to "hear" him in the very same personal and individual way.

How did we come to recognize the Shepherd? How did we get to be the flock of Jesus? Most of us did not come to faith because we set out to deduce the meaning for the universe, even though there are those three a.m. questionswhat is the meaning of life, what is my purpose for living, is there a God? We can never really give faith to someone else, but we can know the truth for ourselves.

We may not be able to answer all the theological answers. No one can. But we can be just like our children or grandchildren who can sing, "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know," even though they do not understand much of the theology or be able to argue with the cultured arguers of religion. We can know the love of Jesus in our own way and want to follow Jesus as we can.

All of the other scriptures assigned for today cycle around this truth. The Kingdom of God comes to those who know Jesus, little lambs of whatever age or station or condition who hear his voice and follow.

We cannot prove it, and often struggle mightily to even explain it, but we know it is true...in this continuation of the season of Easter, and living within the love of the eternal grace of God revealed in the loving Trinity of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.