

*P Christ is risen!*  
*C He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Today we celebrate what we celebrate every fourth Sunday of the Eastertide, Good Shepherd Sunday. And on this Good Shepherd Sunday, the appointed Gospel lesson is always a selection from the Tenth Chapter of John's Gospel. It appears that according to my archives that for the last two go rounds of Good Shepherd Sunday in the lectionary year C, I have begun my sermon with the glorious words of St. John addressing the seven churches of Asia Minor in the Book of Revelation. I will again begin with these words but I want to expand my thoughts on them this time.

First off, in this lesson we hear that there is a great multitude crying out in worship, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the lamb!" And of course, the lamb is the Paschal Lamb, Jesus Christ. With this crowd chanting these words we then hear that those who were around the throne whole-heartedly agreed with the multitude with their double "amen" and began singing:

"Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." (Rev 7:12)

We then hear that the question is asked who is this crowd? We then hear this:

"These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. <sup>15</sup> For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. <sup>16</sup> They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; <sup>17</sup> for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (Rev 7:14b-17)

I mention all of this because this place that John is describing and "throne" of God is thought by the Jews to be the essence of the temple that Jesus enters again in this Gospel passage that is before us today. In the Gospel lesson for today we hear that Jesus is back in the temple during the festival of the dedication. The festival of the Dedication is also known as Hanukkah. There is obviously no need to search for a deep theological understanding of the word Hanukkah, because it simply means in Hebrew, dedication. This festival of the Dedication is a holiday commemorating the rededication of the second temple in Jerusalem after its desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes.

Like the description from Revelation in our second lesson today, the throne of God, for the Jews is the temple. For the Jews, it is the place to meet with God and experience God's glory. And while the people rejoiced and celebrated the cleansing and the rededication of the temple, we hear today in our Gospel that one greater than the temple itself stands in their midst and they are not so happy about it. This is when the religious establishment, rather the Jews, confront Jesus as he walks in the portico of Solomon in the temple...which just happens to be the most guarded area of the temple.

The chill in the temple was not just because it was winter, the chill was also from the hearts of the Jews who were confronting Jesus and asking him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." A literal translation of this question from the Biblical Greek would be, "How long are you taking away our life," or "When will you take our life"...if you are the Messiah? To them, Jesus was a threat. From the modern Greek, this question posed to Jesus translates, "How long will you annoy us?" No matter how you parse this question directed toward Jesus from the Greek, the religious authority recognizes Jesus as a threat, and what Jesus is saying about himself takes authority away from not only them, but it also devastates the very essence of the temple that they are currently and reverently celebrating its cleansing with the festival of the re-Dedication.

Here before the Jews in this temple is God's glory in the flesh and it's not a building. Here before them is the fulfillment of God's Law, not in their works or their worship habits and rituals, but in the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. Here before them stands salvation and forgiveness, but they would already know this if they were his sheep, or that they would listen and hear his voice. But up to this point all they did was confront him in the temple and then threaten to stone him to death...not just in this chapter but two times prior to this encounter today. Here before them stands the manifestation of God in flesh and blood, but for the religious authority the manifestation of God is in their building and not in this man we know as Jesus Christ. The religious authority of the land is confronted by the very presence of God, but the temple doesn't see it that way. The religious authority knows the will of God according to their rites and rituals and it is not this renegade person wandering around in the temple with a rag-tag bunch of followers.

Earlier this week the young Millersville student that has been joining us for worship this past year stopped in to see me as he does from time to time and we talk about different passages from scripture and the state of the church. This past week we were discussing the parable in the Gospel of Matthew (*Matthew 21:28-32*) about the two sons who were sent to work in their father's vineyard. I mention this because our discussion centered in some of this Gospel lesson.

In the parable, the first son does not go to work in the vineyard, but feels remorse and then goes. The other son said right from the start that he *would* go to work, but he didn't. And the question Cole asked was the same question that Jesus asks, which of the sons did the will of the father? The point I made to Cole was that before we could really get into which son did the will of the Father, I asked him, what is the will of the Father? We tend to take a parable like this and get caught up in the minutiae of what the sons did or didn't do and we tie God's will up with what we do or don't do.

Like the religious authority in our Gospel today, they assume God or God's will in all they do and don't, even in the very presence of God Himself stands before them as Jesus Christ. But from the parable and I think in some ways from our Gospel today, we learn from these passages that God is heard and there is a response in the lives of all people, in churches, in temples, in synagogues, and beyond the walls of these places...this may include people who make no claims of being righteous or even religious, but who carry on daily tasks given them by God. In other words, there are decent people in the world out there who do not go to church. When people do not try to be religious, but simply do the will of God through the normal course of living, they respond to God's

call...be it in a temple, a synagogue, or a church or outside of those walls. This can include anyone who hears the Word of God within the church or it may include those who do not. God's dominion takes place and gets done beyond the bounds of church, beyond the bounds of our worship rituals, beyond our laws and prejudices, and in many different places, even where the Gospel may not be heard.

When we juxtaposed this parable with the Gospel today, as Cole and I did in our discussion, the will God is not confined to what we do or what we say, nor is it contained in a temple...the will of God is recognizing the grace of Jesus Christ and establishing that grace NOT just in a temple, a synagogue, or a church building, it is seeing or establishing that grace beyond the walls of a building through the tasks and duties as we go about our everyday ordinary lives...its living out that grace and that faith in our lives.

Think about the mass of humanity that stands before God throughout time, and think of all that has been offered to God through our assumed righteousness, along with all the offerings like, the livestock, crops, oil and money offerings, and all the good works given with the intent that our works and deeds will warrant us salvation and redemption...I begin to think as the prophet Micah did:

<sup>6</sup>“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? <sup>7</sup> Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” <sup>8</sup> He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8)

It is by the pure grace of God given to us through Jesus Christ that we are able to walk humbly with God...but we hear also today in our reading from Revelation that the shepherd will guide them and us to springs of the water of life and God will wipe away every tear. My point here is that God's Shepherd, Jesus Christ is not confined to our human statues and structures, Jesus Christ is leading them and us from the temple to the green pastures beside the still waters that will revive our soul and our shepherd will guide us along right pathways for his name's sake as we go about living our everyday ordinary lives...as we walk through the good and bad of our lives, through dark valleys and even through death itself, God, through Jesus Christ walks with us. Church or Christianity is not just standing in an appointed building, singing, and proclaiming the word of God...worship is one thing, but living out our faith it is what our faith...is what Christianity is all about. Salvation does belong to God as St John tells us in this passage from Revelation. And God has given that salvation to us through His Son Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd and we follow the shepherd when we share that same grace given us as we go about our lives.

Today, in this place we celebrate and give thanks because

<sup>1</sup> The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.

<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures  
and leads me beside still waters.

<sup>3</sup> He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways  
for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup> Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I shall fear no evil; for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup> You spread a table before me  
in the presence of those who trouble me;  
you have anointed my head with oil,  
and my cup is running over.

<sup>6</sup> Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

May God, the Good Shepherd lead us all through this life but most of all, may our Good Shepherd lead us to Himself, so that we dwell in the house of the Lord in here and out there!

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*