

SERMON NOTES

Second Sunday After Pentecost

Synaxis Gospel
John 10:22-30

BELIEVE HIM! HE IS GOD.

INTRODUCTION

In Jesus' day, the Jews were expecting their perfect leader to come, their great promised King, who would, like King Solomon, be a descendent of King David. He would free them from Roman domination and restore their kingdom to the glory it once possessed under David and Solomon. There was a perfect time and a perfect place for the great King to step forward and identify Himself. At that time, and at that place, we find Jesus in our reading for today.

The episode follows a few months after a similar encounter with the religious leaders in Jerusalem during the important autumn Feast of Tabernacles. We studied the record of that encounter in the Notes for the "Sixth Sunday After Easter." Because our reading continues that discussion, it may be helpful to reread the Notes for that Sermon, "The Abundant Life." There Jesus had presented Himself as the Shepherd, a metaphor the religious rulers would recognize. It was often used for the King, the Messiah/Christ, and even more so for God Himself. Though the metaphor was clear enough, the rulers were not satisfied; they wanted Jesus to claim "plainly" that He is the Messiah, the Christ of God, their promised Savior and King. What they planned to do with that claim is not a part of our reading; it is the rest of the story found in the last verses of John 10. Our reading deals with their question and the tremendous answer Jesus gave.

SYNAXIS READING

John 10:22-30

At that time the Feast of the Dedication took place at Jerusalem; it was winter, and Jesus was walking in the Temple in the portico of Solomon. The Jews therefore gathered around Him, and were saying to Him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."

Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father's Name, these bear witness of Me. But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep."

"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and

they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand.

“My Father, Who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.

“I and the Father are one.”

NOTES

At that time the Feast of the Dedication took place at Jerusalem;

The feast was a celebration of the rededication of the Temple. Today, we would recognize this feast by the name, Chanukah. It always occurs sometime in December—near December 25. For the Jews, it was like a Fourth of July celebration of independence. At one time, the Jews had a brief period of self rule. At that time, it had been necessary to cleanse their Temple and rededicate it, after the pagans had desecrated it. During the days of Jesus, the Jews were a people no longer free, but under the dominion of the Romans. This Feast of the Dedication celebration, then, was in memory of those former happy days and in hope of the future freedom under God’s promised King, the Messiah (the Christ).

it was winter, and Jesus was walking in the Temple in the portico of Solomon

The temple was surrounded by thick walls, a covered walkway supported by 2 rows of columns lined the inside of the walls (the southern wall’s portico had 4 rows of columns). The eastern part of the portico faced the entrance to the temple, and provided protection from the chill winds. This was called Solomon’s portico. Solomon had been the son of David who reigned over Israel during the time of the greatest extent of their power and glory.

The Jews therefore gathered around Him, and were saying to Him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.”

The descendants of that former great kingdom of Solomon, and who longed for its restoration, were the Jews. However, in this case, John uses *the Jews* to refer to their leaders—the high priests and their powerful relatives, along with the Pharisees, the teachers of the Law of God. These have gathered around Jesus on this significant occasion, and in this place, with its recollections of Solomon’s glorious kingdom.

There was a division among the common people concerning Jesus. Some said He was insane. However, He had healed the eyes of a blind man, an unheard of feat, but which was one of the signs that was prophesied the Messiah would perform.¹ Also, just previous to this scene, Jesus had portrayed Himself as “the Good Shepherd” a metaphor the Jews would have understood as a reference to the promised Messiah and to God Himself.²

The rulers understood the metaphor of the Shepherd. But they wanted to hear outright if Jesus was making a veiled claim. It was as if they were saying, “No more hints! Just tell us! Are you or aren’t you the promised King who will restore our freedom, and our power and glory, as it was under David’s son, King Solomon.”

Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe;

¹ Isaiah 42:7; cf. Isaiah 35:5 where the One doing this is God, Himself.

² See Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34:11-15

John the Baptist announced that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah, the promised King);³ it was confirmed to Nathanael;⁴ and Jesus told the Jews that what John the Baptist said concerning Him was true.⁵ He had also told them using the metaphors. Moreover, He had told them in other ways that He is the Christ—the miracles He performed were the fulfillment of prophecy, if they only had eyes to see.

the works that I do in My Father's Name, these bear witness of Me.

The miracles, which only could be done in the power of God, were the proof of His identity.

But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep.

What Jesus meant by this statement hangs on the translation of the Greek conjunction, ὅτι. This conjunction could be causal, and translated because, as it has been traditionally translated in the English King James Bible.⁶

However, the conjunction could be resultive and would then be translated as *with the result that*. The conjunction is used in this way in John 7:35, where the King James Bible translates it as *that* in the sense of *so that* or *with the result that*: “Whither will he go that we shall not find him?” Other examples are John 14:22 and Paul’s use of the conjunction in 1 Timothy 6:7. The writer of Hebrews use of it in Hebrews 2:6 is a translation of the Hebrew conjunction ׀ quoting from Psalm 8:5 (in the Hebrew, verse 4): “What is man, that (that results in) Thou art mindful of him?” The Hebrew conjunction can express cause, but it has other uses, one of which expresses consecution (result) “esp. after a question implying surprise or depreciation” (as in Psalm 8:5)⁷ or after a negative⁸ as in Genesis 40:15, “I have done nothing wrong that (with the result that) they should put me into prison.”

Assuming that the words Jesus originally spoke were not Greek, but Aramaic, a cognate of Hebrew, He probably used the Hebrew conjunction ׀ after the negative clause and the Greek faithfully translated it with ὅτι. If so, this is a high indication that the following clause is result.

However, as we have shown, in both languages the conjunctions can be rendered in English as causal or to indicate result. We are properly thrown then upon the context to decide which of the two nuances Jesus meant. In the context of the conversation, in verses 37 and 38, Jesus again refers to their lack of belief. But He urges them to examine the facts. His works prove that He is telling the truth. Then He adds, “Though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me and I in the Father.” If they can believe Him only if they are His sheep (which the

³ John 1:34

⁴ John 1:49-50

⁵ John 5:33-36

⁶ In 1611, when the King James Bible was first published, the teachings of the fifth century Church father, Augustine of Hippo, had influenced the earlier English Bible translators such as Wycliffe’s community. Augustine taught that God predestined, before the creation of the world, the ones who would be saved. Therefore, only those so predestined could believe the Gospel. Commenting on John 10:26, Augustine stated that Jesus considered the non-sheep He was addressing “predestined to everlasting destruction and not won to eternal life by the price of His own blood [Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 7, edited by Philip Schaff (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004) p.267].” This doctrine of Augustine has probably driven the translation choice of the conjunction ὅτι in this passage. Although ὅτι is the conjunction found in the **best** Greek manuscripts for this passage, there is evidence that the conjunction γαρ is a variant—although the 1991 apparatus of Nestle-Aland’s *Novum Testamentum Graece* does not list it, but see on John 10:26 in the *Polyglott Bible* (Bielefeld: Verlag von Belhagen & Klarfing, 18) p. 414-415. The conjunction γαρ would be properly translated as *because*. Jerome, an admirer of Augustine in later life, produced the Latin *Vulgate Bible* from the original languages. The Latin conjunction Jerome chose to translate ὅτι is the causal conjunction *quia* (*because*). The ancient Armenian Bible written in Grapar has the conjunction *zi*, which like ὅτι has both causal and resultive options for translation.

⁷ Brown-Driver-Briggs *Hebrew Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1979) p.472d

⁸ Ibid

causal translation of ὅτι would imply), why would Jesus be urging them to do something that is not in their power to do as non-sheep?

Moreover, if we can equate ‘children of God’ with Jesus’ sheep, then one becomes His sheep by believing. As John 1:12 states: “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right (power) to become the children of God, even to those who believe on His Name.” The order is: belief before status as His sheep. Disbelief results in barring the person from being of Jesus’ flock.

If this argument is accepted, we should retranslate the statement: “**But you do not believe, consequently you are not of My sheep.**”

My sheep hear My voice,

Jesus describes His sheep and His relationship with them. They hear (with the sense of hear and obey) His voice.

and **I** know them,

His relationship with them is not that of a distant ruler to his subjects. This is not simply intellectual knowledge; this refers to a personal relationship. He knows them personally. There is an emphasis on the pronoun ‘I.’

and they follow Me;

The sheep’s part in this relationship is not only to hear and obey, but to follow Him. They trust Him even when they do not understand where or why He is leading them down a certain path.

And **I** give eternal life to them,

In the twenty-third Psalm, the LORD, Who is the Shepherd, provides all that the sheep needs in life. Here, He also provides life that never ends. Again, the emphasis is on the pronoun *I*. This is a claim only God can make.

and they shall never perish;

The result of this relationship for the sheep is that they will never die; they will never be destroyed. The double negative in this Greek expression is the strongest kind of negative. They will absolutely never die or perish! This promise is for all eternity.

and no one shall snatch them out of My hand.

Literally this reads in Greek: “And someone will not snatch them away from My hand.”

The future is secure for the sheep; they are safe under the all powerful hand of Jesus Christ. The enemy cannot get to the sheep to carry them away.

My Father, Who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all;

Of course it is self-evident that the Father is greater than all. However, this statement reads differently in the best Greek manuscripts: “What My Father has given to Me is greater than all else.”⁹ If this reading is correct, what did the Father give that is greater than all else? The relative pronoun refers to a neuter noun. In this episode, two Greek neuter nouns are prominent—those for *work* and *sheep*.

⁹ As Max Zerwick, in his *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (Rome: Editric Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1993) p. 318, states: “The difficulty caused by the order of words [in the best manuscript witnesses] leads many to prefer the poorly attested variant’ which most English Bibles quote.

Bernard rejects the best manuscript's wording, for he believes that the relative pronoun would then refer to the sheep, which he does not see as appropriate.¹⁰ He holds to the traditional translation of our text.

Morris, on the other hand, accepts the manuscript's wording, and does see the sheep as the gift.¹¹ Jesus has been speaking of the sheep. They are most precious to the Father, and it has been given to Jesus to be their shepherd. Morris extends the meaning of the sheep to the Church.

Perhaps, what the Father gives Jesus is the work. The work that the Father has given to Jesus to accomplish includes caring for the sheep, but it also encompasses the entire plan of salvation. The works that Jesus performed are the witnesses that He has been set apart (sanctified) for this work. Viewed rightly, they can lead men into the belief necessary for salvation. The individual works of Jesus (the miracles) are far greater than any other man has ever done, but the work of salvation is the greatest of all.

and no one is able to snatch *them* out of the Father's hand.

We assume here, though the direct object is missing in the Greek text, that the sheep are the object. If so, no one is able to snatch the sheep—or anything else for that matter—from the Father's hand. Even more assurance is hereby given for the security of the sheep. Before, Jesus had said that no one **will** snatch them out of His hand. Here, He adds that no one is even **able** to snatch (them) from the Father's hand.

I and the Father are one.

There are several things to notice about this statement. First of all, the pronoun, *I*, is placed first for emphasis. Jesus emphasized that He Himself is one with the Father.¹²

The second is the use of the Greek neuter form of *one*. The neuter word used for *one* when it stands alone, as it does here, means *one single thing*.¹³ What that one thing is must be implied. The implication the Jews understood was Deity.

The Jews understood this statement to be blasphemy and picked up stones to stone Him. This is even more readily understood if Jesus was speaking Aramaic. As in Hebrew, in Aramaic there is no neuter word for *one*. If He spoke Aramaic, presumably, He did not use the feminine for one, but the masculine (𐤀 in Hebrew, ܐ in Aramaic). There is only One God, and in linking Himself with the Father in this way, Jesus said that He is that One.

APPLICATION

Every four years, a new President of the United States is elected. During the campaign, those seeking the office do their best to convince the electorate, who scrutinize their qualifications. Will he or she solve the problems we face at home and abroad—the problems at home with the economy, employment, education, immigration, national security, and crime. How will he or she handle the problems we are embroiled in abroad, in the Middle East and around the world? Every four years, you can be sure we will see the candidates pick the perfect time, the perfect symbolic place, to present themselves as the perfect choice to lead the American people. How can we know if any of them is telling us the truth? All we can do is look at their track record. What have they done in the past?

¹⁰ J. H. Bernard *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928) pp. 347-348

¹¹ Leon Morris *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971) p. 522

¹² The Jews must have been thoroughly shocked by this bold and clear statement. They had expected Him to claim to be the King of the Jews, not the God of the Jews.

¹³ As in Luke 18:22: "Yet you lack one thing . . ."

One of our ancient Armenian kings was in a similar dilemma concerning someone claiming to tell the truth. That someone was St. Gregory the Illuminator, who we remembered yesterday. According to our tradition, Gregory had related the Gospel to the pagan King T'rtat, who didn't believe a word of it. Moreover, for Gregory's refusal to give up Christ, the king had him thrown into a pit to die a miserable death. For long years, Gregory languished there. But then, the king was told that Gregory could cure the king's illness. Surprised that Gregory still lived, the king ordered that Gregory be pulled up out of the pit, Khor Virap. Gregory asked God to heal the king. The king was cured, and the miracle testified to the fact that Gregory was telling the truth about God. T'rdat accepted the proof and became a Christian. His conversion began a movement that swept the country, and Armenia became the first nation to adopt Christianity as its state religion.

In our reading today, it is the Jewish rulers who do not believe that Jesus is the Christ, the longed for promised King Who would be their Savior. Still, in order to indict Him with His own words, they ask Him to tell them "plainly" if He is the Christ or not. Jesus tells them to examine His works. The miracles would testify that He, indeed, was telling the truth. The miracles that Jesus performed could have been done only by the power of God. Therefore, the rulers of the Jews should have believed Him. But they did not.

The tragedy for the unbelievers was that their unbelief kept them from the greatest blessing a person can know—to be under the care and protection of Jesus Christ. In contrast to the unbelieving Jewish rulers, Jesus depicted the believers as sheep under the care of the Good Shepherd. These sheep know their Shepherd; they follow and obey Him. As the Good Shepherd, He not only cares for the sheep, He knows them personally and guards them from the Enemy. Moreover, Jesus gives them the gift of eternal life—they will never, ever perish. They are eternally secure because they are in His hand—they are in His power, where no one can snatch them away.

Would the unbelievers examine the track record of our Lord and believe Him, and, by believing, enter into this most blessed state? They asked for "plain" speech. He gave it to them: "I and the Father are One." They understood Him. He said that He is God. Did they believe? That is the rest of their story.

What about our story? What do we believe? He is not asking us to make "a blind leap of faith," He has given us sufficient reasons to believe Him. For hundreds of years, the prophets foretold what He would do. He did it all. The Resurrection was the final and greatest proof of all. He asks us to believe it, so that we may know and understand Who He really is. We will know we can truly trust Him.

So, do we believe that He is God? Do we believe that, as our Good Shepherd, He sacrificed Himself for us? Do we know Him and do what He commands? If so, we can be assured that we are safe for all eternity with Him. He knows us personally—our relationship with Him is personal. Moreover, our great Enemy can never snatch us away. We will live forever and ever and ever with our awesome and wonderful God.

