

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN - PART XIII

JESUS AS THE GOOD SHEPHERD AND AS ONE WITH THE FATHER

I. Jesus continues His discourses surrounding the Feast of Tabernacles with His Good Shepherd discourse.

A. In this discourse He picks up on Old Testaments themes of God, the king, and religious leaders as shepherds of the Chosen People.

1. God above all is the Shepherd of His people, both protecting them and guiding them through the dangers of the world to the green fields of prosperity. Gen. 48:18, 49:24; Ps. 23:1-4, 77:21, 80:1-2, 95:7; Is. 49:8-9; Ez. 34:11-31; Micah 7:14.

2. The king, as God's appointed representative, was also the shepherd of the people, especially of those who are most defenseless. He would keep vice and injustice at bay and bring God's strength to earth. See Ps. 2:9; Ez. 34:23, 37:24; Micah 5:2 (referring to the future king); see also Num. 27:18 (describing Joshua as a shepherd.) King David had been a shepherd before being anointed king. See 1 Sam. 16:11. Moses likewise cared for the flocks of his father-in-law Jethro before being called by God. Ex. 3:1.

3. The religious leaders are also meant to be shepherds, guiding the people to righteousness and keeping errors at bay. However, we know of this image mostly in the negative sense, for the prophets would condemn the poor religious leaders (and possibly kings) for shepherding the people falsely or for self-interest. See Jer. 2:8, 10:21; 23:1-3; Ez. 34:1-10.

4. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel had all prophesied that God would replace the poor shepherds by His own direct power and that He would send new shepherds "after [His] own heart" to guide His people rightly. See Is. 40:11; Jer. 23:4-6, Ez. 34:17-34 (describing both God and an heir to David as the shepherd.)

5. The New Testament would pick up on this theme of shepherding, calling for pastors (in Latin "shepherds") to guide the Christian flock faithfully. See, e.g., Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11; 1 Peter 5:3-4

B. The image of shepherds is an interesting one, for it combines majesty and humility.

1. In calling for the king and religious leaders to be shepherds, God is calling on them to be with their people, as shepherds must be with the sheep. And in describing Himself as a shepherd, God even in the Old Testament was giving a hint that He would do the same.

2. The curious thing was that, as a practical matter, shepherds were lower class and looked down upon in part because they were semi-nomadic and could not keep the religious customs (e.g., the Sabbaths and the feasts) like other could.

3. In addition, sheep were at the same time valuable, but also frustrating, for they could easily wander off and had to be protected. The sheep wool was valuable for its purity, but for the same reason had to be kept clean. Thus, the image implies a role of guidance, protection, and purification. The shepherd would count each sheep as he went in the gate and see if anything was wrong. If so, he would heal the sheep if possible. Cf. Lev. 27:32.

- The sheep were kept primarily for their wool, not for eating, although Zechariah does have an image of a ruthless shepherd, who sells the sheep (God's people) for slaughter. See Zech. 11:4-17.

4. There is also a contrast between the idyllic "pastoral" scenes common in classical and Hebrew art and literature and the harsh realities of cold, thieves, and wild animals that shepherds often faced. Jesus combines the two ideas together by indicating that, precisely by taking on the harsh realities of the human condition, He leads us to the ideal realm.

II. Jesus begins with a familiar contrast, between the robber, who would take the sheep away from their rightful owner, and the true shepherd.

A. The robber is deceitful, coming in by a different way. The implication is that if one comes presenting a completely different way that what has been done before, he is a false shepherd, taking the flock away. See Matt. 5:17-20.

B. Jesus goes further and says that the shepherd calls His sheep "by name" and that they know His voice. He is picking up on the fact that good shepherds know each sheep individually and train the sheep to come to them at the sound of their voice and no other.

- God had in the Old Testament said that He called His People as a whole "by name," but here He applies this principle

more individually. See Is. 43:1. Part of the idea is that salvation is not only a general principle, but also that God personally applies it to each person.

- There is also an implication that those who accept God's guidance will intuitively recognize that Jesus is from God. Likewise there will be an intuition about which callings are from Him.

C. As is common, the people misunderstand Jesus, perhaps not recognizing the point He is trying to make about Himself.

1. His explanation presents Himself as both the shepherd and as the "door" that lets in other shepherds. This image would not be surprising, for the shepherd would commonly stay at the entrance to the sheepfold, acting as a doorkeeper, letting in only the assistants who were authorized.

- The implication is that Jesus is the shepherd, but that there will be other shepherds. This notion is consistent with the prophecies of having one shepherd, but also having others sent by God. See Jer. 3:4, 15. The other shepherds must be called by Christ Himself and imitate Him, following His teachings.

2. Jesus then contrasts the true shepherd and the mere hireling, who works only for pay and does not care about his master's flocks enough really to defend them, knowing that he can always get work elsewhere if he fails here.

3. Jesus also by implication indicates, here and especially in the parable of the lost sheep in the Synoptic Gospels, that He is also not the like a vastly wealthy owner who considers the loss of one sheep a minor issue. See Mat. 18:12-14; Luke 5:3-7. Rather, like a son caring for his father's flock, he does not want to lose any of His Father's people. See 1 Sam. 17:34-37.

- Jesus also says He has other sheep not of this flock, but will join them to the one flock. Most plainly, the reference is to the fact that many non-Jewish nations will also be brought into the one fold. Thus, Jesus is indicating that the prophecies of foreign nations coming to the kingdom of God are about to be fulfilled. See, e.g., Is. 2:2-6, 42:6, 49:6-7, 66:17-19; Zech. 14:16-19 see also Romans 2:12-16. There is also a possible implication that, even among those not expressly Christian or Catholic, God is calling them in a mysterious way. See Vatican II Council, Lumen Gentium 6. However, the calling is to be a member of the one flock.

4. He takes even this image of loyalty a step further, indicating that: (1) laying down His life is not merely a risk He is taking but is a part of His mission, one that He freely takes upon Himself; and (2) that He Himself has the power to take it up again, and that doing so is also a part of His mission. He also says in verse 10 that He comes, not only to protect, but to give life in abundance. Jesus' claim of divine power is becoming more clear.

5. As a result, there is a division among the people. Some believe that, because He is claiming what by all reasonable accounts is divine power, He must have a demon. Others, however, accept Him noting the calmness and consistency of His teachings and the miraculous cure of the blind man, which reflects the order of God and which the Old Testament lists as a divine prerogative. Ex. 4:11; Ps. 146:8; Is. 29:19, 35:5.

II. On the Feast of the Dedication (Hanukkah), which would occur in late December, Jesus then indicates His identity with the Father, presenting as evidence His works, and also indicates that His disciples will have a share in divine life.

A. The feast celebrates the re-purification of the Temple in 165 B.C. when, under Judas Maccabeus, the Jews re-conquered the Holy Land and Jerusalem from the Selucid dynasty of Syria. One of the Selucid kings, Antiochus IV Epiphanes had persecuted the Jews and placed an altar and/or statue of Zeus in the Temple. When the Jews re-conquered Jerusalem, they re-purified the Temple, and held a festival of lights, which were a symbol of the Law and of liberty. See 1 Macc. 4:36-59, 2 Macc. 10:1-8. According to tradition, there was only enough oil to keep the lights going for one day, but it miraculously lasted eight days for the whole festival. Ezekiel 34, with its passage regarding the current false shepherd and God's promise to shepherd His people would be read during this feast.

B. In His discourse on this festival, the people want to know whether Jesus is the Messiah who, like the Maccabees, will liberate them again and restore their greatness.

- Jesus does not answer directly, for if they are unwilling or unable to understand His words or His miracles, they will not accept Him as the Messiah, at least not in the proper way. Cf. Is. 6:8-13.

- It may be that the people simply wanted evidence against Him, or that they wanted a mere earthly king. In either case, they were not really placing faith in Jesus' words, and so He refuses to answer them directly.

C. Jesus indicates that they should know who He is in at least two related ways.

1. First He says that His works testify to Him. This standard He has cited before. See John 5:36. He indicates that if they were His sheep, they would understand the worked.

2. The second, and related way, is that they should hear His divine voice, if they were really of God's flock. The idea is again that, if one is really trying to follow God, God will give one an intuitive sense of what is right or wrong. See John 5:37-38.

D. Jesus then increases the stakes by saying that He can give "eternal life" and that He and the Father are one, likely referring back to Deuteronomy 6:4, which stated the great principle "The Lord our God is one Lord." The claim to divinity being plain, the people try to stone Jesus, who tries to refer them back to His works as an indication of His truthfulness and what He can do for them.

E. Building on this idea of divine power, He quotes from Psalm 82, which called even unjust rulers "gods." He says that He is more so because the Father has "consecrated" Him.

1. The same word for consecration is used in the Septuagint for the sanctification of the Tent of Dwelling in the desert. See Num. 7:1. The implication is that Jesus is replacing the old Temple as the place for God's presence n earth.

2. There is also a notion that even mere humans can in some way can share in the divine life, although there is a warning in Psalm 82 that, if they fail to carry out God's commands, they will die. Jesus may be indicating that His ministry will fulfill the promise and the warning.

3. Jesus now refers to His human nature, which God has consecrated Him and joined to His divine nature. To avoid any implication that He is merely at the level of the others whom God has sent, He says that He is "in the Father" and the Father in Him, indicating an equality as well as a consecration by the Father.

F. Showing His power again, He escapes and goes to the Jordan River, which is the place of John the Baptist's ministry.

- The implication is that, as John pointed the way to Jesus, so all of these Jewish feasts and customs should be seen as pointing the way to Jesus.

- Some people do recall the words of John the Baptist and accept Jesus, while others do not.