

SERMON FOR EASTER 4C

Well, there's only one week to go, and then the election campaign will be over and we'll know who our government will be, hopefully. One of the interesting things about election campaigns is the relationship between the media and politicians. And it's often a quite a vexed relationship. One of the things that often happens is that journalists try and get a 'gotcha moment'. A 'gotcha moment' is where journalists try and catch a politician out with a tricky question that the politician will slip up on. A particularly popular type of 'gotcha question' nowadays is to ask the politician to answer 'yes' or 'no'. But often the politicians have difficulty giving a yes or no answer and often they are criticised for not giving a clear and concise answer to a question. But I think in many instances that it's a bit unfair to ask these questions which in many instances are not as clear cut as the journalist would like to make them out. Often there are broader issues involved and to give a clear and simple 'yes' or 'no' answer is difficult as there's much more to the issue than just a black or white answer. Often there's a lot more grey involved. And so sometimes I'm actually a bit on the side of the politicians and I guess I am today because we see Jesus in a very similar situation in our Gospel reading.

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is what is known as 'Good Shepherd Sunday' and that is because our Gospel reading each year of the three year cycle comes from the 10th chapter of John's Gospel, which is called the 'Good Shepherd Discourse.' And our reading for Year C is from the end of that discourse, and it's slightly different from the other two years, in that these words occur later than the previous verses and that while Jesus talks about his sheep, he doesn't get into the kind of depth that he does in the other years gospel readings which come from the first 18 verses of chapter 10.

The issue in this part of chapter ten is around Jesus as Messiah and so we are told that the Jews come and asked Jesus a 'gotcha' question. As I've said before, when John in his gospel talks about 'the Jews' he's not referring to the Jewish people in general, rather he is talking about the religious leadership of the Jewish people in Jerusalem, a very specific group of people. And John says they gather around Jesus as he is walking through the portico of Solomon, which was where the Kings of Israel sat in judgement.

John gives the impression that Jesus is caught in a first-century media scrum as they circle around him and ask, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." The word translated as 'suspense' can also mean to be annoyed, so you could translate that phrase, "How long will keep annoying us? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." So they want a yes or no answer from Jesus. And perhaps Jesus is a good politician, because he doesn't give them a yes and no answer.

The problem for Jesus is that he can't answer 'no', because right through John's gospel to this point, John has been telling us and other characters in the gospel have been telling us that Jesus is the Messiah. But if he says 'yes' then he will have a problem.

On four occasions up to this point in John's gospel, the Jewish leadership either try and plot to have Jesus killed or try and kill him. And then in verse 31, the verse after our reading, they take up stones to try and kill him again for saying that he and the Father are one.

So if Jesus says 'yes' they would probably have wanted to get rid of him because any Messianic figure at that time in Jerusalem would be trouble for the leaders of the Jewish people, because they would worry that the Romans would crush any hint of rebellion. One of the most popular ideas of the Messiah in Judaism at that time, was that someone would rise up and lead the Jewish people to overthrow their Roman overlords. And this idea would have been heightened at the time of the year when this reading is taking place.

This encounter happens during the Feast of Dedication, which we know as 'Hanukkah', which is a celebration of the liberation of the Jewish people after the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes had invaded and defiled the Jerusalem temple in 167BC. Antiochus had built an altar to his own gods within the temple sanctuary and this led to an uprising by the Jewish people led by Judas Maccabeus and his brothers, who regained control of the temple around 165BC and rededicated it to the God of Israel.

And so Jesus is appearing in the temple at the Feast of Dedication, a feast which celebrated the liberation of the Jewish people. So the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem were probably worried about what Jesus was doing there and so they try and get him to either deny he is the Messiah or to make it clear. But Jesus won't give in to the 'gotcha' moment.

He sort of answers the question by stating that, "I have told you, and you do not believe." He then goes on to say that "you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep." So Jesus is essentially saying here that only those who follow him will know who he truly is.

Jesus is not giving in to the black-and-white answers that the Jewish leadership want him to give. And I think one of the problems in our world today is that so many people want black-and-white answers. We want black-and-white answers from our leaders whether it be within the Church or we want black-and-white answers from our political leaders. But as we all know, life is not always black-and-white. There are plenty of shades of grey in between. And so often when we seek the simple black-and-white answers, we end up not with solutions, but with conflict. And we see that so often in public discourse today.

Today's gospel (perhaps) suggests that we can be comfortable in the grey areas of life, whether it be within the Church, in the political realm or even in our own lives. So often easy answers are hard to find, and perhaps that's OK. Because for those who listen to his voice and follow the Good Shepherd, we know that God is with us and will never abandon us. As Psalm 23 reminds us, "Goodness and mercy, shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord, forever."