

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, May 9th 2017

One of the special features of the Gospel of John, is the focus on Jewish feasts, especially Passover and Tabernacles (also called Booths). In this gospel, feasts are noted not simply to mark the time of the year when an episode in Jesus' life occurs but as part of the John's symbolic world in his gospel narrative. That is, the feasts provide a background for illuminating what the Evangelist wants to communicate about the reality of Jesus as the fulfillment of all the institutions of the Jewish tradition.

The "feast of the Dedication [or Renewal]" is what we know as Hanukkah, which is still an important feast for contemporary Jews. It is a commemoration of the successful rebellion of the Judeans against their Syrian overlord, Antiochus Epiphanes IV, who was trying to stamp out all that was distinctive about his Jewish subjects—circumcision, temple worship, the reading of Torah and the carrying out its laws. The Maccabees led a revolution around 165 BC that enabled the Jews to reclaim and rededicate the Jerusalem temple and to take back their autonomy for about a hundred years, before the Romans came to conquer and occupy them. So, naturally, the annual celebration of Hanukkah during the time of Jesus encouraged speculation about Jesus: could he be the expected Messiah, the Son of David who would lead another revolution against the tyrants of their own day, the Romans?

So John's mention of Hanukkah and the name Solomon (the immediate son of David who reigned over the largest expansion of the nation of Israel) evokes what would be on people's minds at that time. That is why Jesus' adversaries gang up on him and challenge him to identify himself as the expected Messiah (whom most people considered a David-type military leader). The answer Jesus gives is that he sees himself as a shepherd, whose "flock" are those who accept him as their leader. Ezekiel 34 is the pertinent background here, for this vision pictures another "David" who will shepherd the scattered people of Israel, find the lost, and heal and feed them, all this in contrast to false leaders who were self-serving and abusive shepherds. In fact, Ezekiel says, the real shepherd will be God. Hence the power of Jesus' climactic statement: "The Father and I are one."

In a narrative where Jesus had referred to his body as the temple of God, the fact that this happens in the temple, which had already been destroyed by the Romans by the time John writes, would not be lost on John's readers. Knowing Jesus as their risen Lord, they knew that Jesus is the embodiment of what the Jerusalem temple stood for, the "place" of the presence of God—the "tenting" of the Word of God among us, as John's prologue proclaims.

The takeaway for us? It is our faith that the risen Jesus really is our shepherd who fulfills the vision of Ezekiel 34—that is, not just the consoler and protector of the shepherd figure of Psalm 23, but the healer and leader who now continues to gather the scattered children of God. He is the ultimate leader we trust as we try to negotiate troubled times.

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