

Asking Questions Already Answered

John 10:22-30

“And it was at Jerusalem the feast of the dedication, and it was winter. And Jesus walked in the temple in Solomon's porch. Then came the Jews round about him, and said unto him, How long dost thou make us to doubt? If thou be the Christ, tell us plainly. Jesus answered them, I told you, and ye believed not: the works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness of me. But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand. I and my Father are one.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, we probably all have experienced the embarrassment of asking a clerk for something in a supermarket while we were standing immediately in front of the product we sought. Possibly we overlooked the item because we were distracted by a profusion of similar products, or perhaps because our mental image of the item proved inaccurate. Something similar occurs in our Gospel lesson for this morning as the Jews ask for information about something that is right before their eyes. This morning I would like to consider the theme: **Asking questions already answered.**

I. Why ask the question.

Many times prior to the moment of our text Jesus had plainly revealed, demonstrated, proved, and claimed his true identity. He had changed water into wine at Cana. He had told Nicodemus that God so loved the world that he sent his Son to save the world. He had healed a lame man at the Pool of Bethesda. He had claimed God as his Father. He fed five thousand men with five loaves of bread and two fish. He had returned sight to a blind man and he had proclaimed, “I am the good Shepherd.” Yet, in spite of all these proofs and claims, some of the people gathered in the Temple asked him, “Who are you? Tell us plainly.”

Why did people continue to ask this question? The Jews who asked Jesus about his mission were motivated by a hostile and argumentative spirit. They were not seeking a better understanding. Many of them had prejudged Jesus and only wanted an excuse to execute him. Their question was preceded by argument and followed by hostility. The Jews argued among themselves concerning Jesus. Following his answer, they took up stones to slay him.

The people who asked Jesus to give them a clear indication sought to evade their responsibility for their own lack of faith. Confessing faith in Christ requires a leap of faith initiated, motivated, directed, and completed by the Holy Spirit. These people resisted that leap. They wanted Jesus to take them off the hook. They wanted him to take the responsibility for their lack of faith.

A man walked into a restaurant one day. He looked at the menu but could not decide what he wanted to order. Finally, he asked the impatient waiter what he recommended. After the waiter had brought the man his meal the man did not like it, so he blamed the waiter.

People today often ask for the same reasons; they want to be let off the hook. They want to be able to blame someone else for their failures. (Think back to Genesis, chapter three, Adam Eve looked for someone else to blame.) Those who resist do not want to decide for themselves

based upon testimony revealed in Scripture and the witness of family members, friends, and evangelists. The Gospel message of Christ as Messiah seems absurd to these people when they consider a world besieged by problems. They are angry and hostile toward a God who would permit Russia to invade the Ukraine, tornadoes to kill unsuspecting families, disease to strike a loved one. They want God to prove himself by reaching into the here and now and taking control. They fail to understand that God did so when he entered the world as a child in Bethlehem. Since these people have not received the exact answer they requested, they believe it absolves them of their responsibility for their lack of faith.

Hard questions like these and the influence of the “old Adam” that resides in every human being tempt us also to ask in a doubting and troubled way, “Jesus, are you really the Christ?” The world bombards us with a hundred questions a day. It ridicules our trust and attempts to make us look foolish in our own eyes. It is tough to be a believer when the critics around us ridicule the Gospel as ancient fairy tales. It is difficult to stick to our faith when science promises that soon it will reveal the secrets of the universe, the origins of life, and a logical explanation of all phenomena — presently known and unknown. When the world and our flesh gain the upper hand, we ask God to let us off the hook. “Show us plainly God! Don’t make us rely upon things not seen and trust in what cannot be measured.”

These are questions that need to be asked by each person, but as a genuine seeking for peace and comfort, a sincere reaching out for help amid helplessness. God’s Spirit leads, guides, and encourages us toward such an asking. These can be the most important questions we shall ever ask. They outweigh questions of what I shall do and whom shall I marry (or not marry). Answering these questions may determine our eternal destiny, our identification, and our future relationship with Christ if we ask these questions with a sincere desire to receive God’s answer! “Philip said to him, Lord, show us the Father, and it will suffice us. Jesus said unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; and how do you ask then, Show us the Father? Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me: or else believe me for the very work’s sake.” (John 14:8-9, 11)

Every so often science and medicine take a giant leap forward. A scientist or a doctor questions the old, accepted assumptions. He or she asks why a thing must be a certain way, or why can’t it be done differently? Frequently the free-wheeling scientist earns the scorn of his or her peers, but eventually, the new idea takes hold until someday it is shaken by other sincere questions. When we ask questions about God and Jesus, they can be critically important, if we are not asking God to let us off the hook, as long as we are not asking him to prove himself in a manner we prescribe. When we ask sincerely, Jesus answers quickly. He points to his words and his signs.

I once heard another pastor deliver a superb explanation of the story of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:20ff). When the rich man died he asked Abraham to send Lazarus back to his brothers so that they would not spend eternity in torment with the rich man. Abraham responded that even if a man returned from the dead, it would not convince the rich man’s brothers. Abraham said, “They have the prophets.” We have the Bible that tells us about the Messiah, about Jesus, the Christ, who came in the name of the Lord. God has given us an answer; he has told us plainly.

II. *Why Christ’s answer is so wonderful.*

Jesus responds wonderfully to the question put to him in a hostile unfriendly manner. Maybe he remembered the Proverb that says, “A soft answer turns away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger.” (Proverbs 15:1) Jesus phrases his answer with love, caring, and compassion. He reaches out without argument or hostility to the possibility of a relationship in which one cares completely for another. He uses the image of a sheep and a shepherd.

I do not know how sheep ever existed in the wild. Perhaps there were so many of them that they could afford to lose a large number to predators. Perhaps they were more aggressive at one point in their evolution. However, sheep have become so domesticated that they cannot exist on their own without the protection of a shepherd. Sheep were very important to the ancient Israelites. They ate sheep, used their milk for cheese, spun their wool for cloth, and used their skins for leather. The Israelites entrusted shepherds with protecting and providing for the sheep. The shepherds took their responsibility very seriously, living with the sheep in the field and putting themselves between the sheep and danger. Thus, Jesus portrays his relationship with his followers in a loving, protective fashion.

Jesus’ answer is filled with the power of God, who rules all things. Jesus affirms that it is the Father’s will that the sheep be his and the Father’s power shields the sheep. Jesus states, “I and the Father are one.” Sometimes we think in terms of a dualistic universe, that is there are two equal powers — good and evil. In such a universe we could never be certain of the outcome of the struggle between the two powers. However, our universe is not dualistic. Good contends with evil, but evil is not equal to good. God has already defeated Satan. God is the prime mover of the universe; he has the only power that truly counts. Thus, Jesus could affirm that no one would ever snatch the sheep away from the Father, and finally, no one could ever snatch the sheep — his followers — away from him.

God, who has begun the good work of faith in us, will bring that faith to fruition. It is all his work; we add nothing. He will preserve us in the faith in the midst of our enemies. This should build confidence when we struggle with the world, when our problems threaten to overwhelm us, and when the questions of life loom too large for us to handle. Paul told the Thessalonians in his first letter, “And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, faithful is he that calleth you, who will also do it.” (1 Thessalonians 5:20-24)

During the early days in the West, circuit-riding preachers had to swim their horses across rivers. They tell us that when they were crossing swollen and overflowing rivers if they fixed their gaze upon the swirling waters around them, they were likely to become dizzy and, falling from the saddle, be swept away by the flood. But if they fixed their eye upon the trunk of a great tree on the bank, or upon the summit of a hill or mountain, they rode through in safety.

In the storms of life, faith gives us balance, calm and safety, for we fix our eye, not upon the shifting scene about us, but upon the eternal God who has promised to bring us to his heavenly home. Christ, our good Shepherd, will preserve us amid our enemies. He calls each of us to partake of his genuine peace and comfort. The mundane cares of life, as well as the major calamities, come under his observation. Remember, this is the same Jesus who said, “So do not start worrying . . . take no thought for tomorrow. Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened to you.” (Matthew 7)

The good Shepherd knows his sheep and they know him. He has promised us eternal life. I suppose there is the temptation for all of us to ask at one time or another, “God show us the truth plainly. Use your finger to write across the sky and declare your presence. Put your detractors to shame by declaring yourself before the world. Take us off the hook.” However, if God did respond in this manner we would no longer be living by faith. Instead, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Do we really need to ask again a question that has been answered? Consider the psalmist, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the works of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out to all the earth, their words to the end of the world” (Psalm 19:1-5).

The final joy and comfort of the answer comes in the works that Christ has done and still does in the Father’s name. His work of suffering and death has made possible the new relationship between sheep and Shepherd. Today, tomorrow, and every day there is no need to question or doubt, but only to believe and receive strength and comfort. Amen!

May the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Sola Dei Gloria!