

ACT V : THE SHEPHERD-MESSIAH
JOHN 9:1 – 10:42

In the celebrations of the festival of Booths much use is made of water and light (see pages 168-169). In chapters seven and eight John has portrayed Jesus as the real source of 'living water' (7:38) and of 'the light of life' (8:12). He now selects a scene from Jesus' ministry and shapes it in such a way as to illustrate these themes. The focus is on Jesus as 'the light of the world' (9:5) giving sight to one who has never seen before. The image of water, too, is present, for the man comes to see only when he washes in the waters of Siloam. Through the sacrament of Baptism we are enlightened by Jesus, purified and consecrated to God, and built into God's new temple. In Jesus God is bringing about a new creation. Having illustrated these themes, John then moves on a new image, the central image of this section, Jesus the Shepherd seeking the lost sheep and ready to lay down his life for them.

Act V Scene 1. Jesus gives sight to a blind man

In chapters seven and eight there has been no mention of Jesus' disciples. Jesus has been standing alone, inviting and challenging us to come to him to find life. Now, for the first time since the scene in the synagogue in Capernaum, we see Jesus again with his disciples. They come across a man who has been blind since birth. The initial reaction of the disciples is typical. In spite of the subtle reflections of the Book of Job, suffering was commonly understood to be divine punishment. The underlying assumption behind such thinking is that whatever happens in this world must be God's will. Since God is just, if a person is suffering someone must have sinned, either the man himself must have sinned in the womb (there was a Rabbinic opinion that spoke of this possibility), or he was suffering the effects of his parents' sin (see Exodus 20:5).

Jesus does not accept their assumption (see commentary on 3:14). He focuses not on the cause of the blindness but on where God is in the situation, on what God wants to happen and on how the man's blindness can be an occasion of grace and a means of showing forth the wonder of God's action in the world. We are here at the heart of a profound Christian insight. God has given us freedom. When we abuse this freedom and act contrary to the will of God, evil effects follow. These cannot be attributed to God. But neither is God a passive spectator. God is present to us and brings grace to bear in every situation. In other words, everything is graced. We are wrong to think of everything that happens as being God's will. We are never wrong to believe that God is offering us his grace in every situation, even the most sinful.

In the present scene, Jesus rules out sin and states that 'he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him'(9:3). For the first time, Jesus associates his disciples with himself in the mission given to him by his Father ('We must work'). He then picks up the note of urgency which has been prominent in the dialogue of the two previous chapters (see 7:33-34; 8:21) and he repeats his earlier claim: 'I am the light of the world'(9:5; see 8:12). John is about to use his considerable dramatic ability to portray Jesus as 'the light [that] shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it'(1:5).

¹As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth.

²His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'

³Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.

⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.

⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.'

6When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, 7saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent).

Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

If the disciples want to find the answer to the question that Jesus has posed they must watch him because he is the one who reveals the Father (1:18). The answer is immediate. The blind man is a symbol of us all, blinded as we are and living in darkness. God wants us to see. Jesus makes a paste with spittle (compare Mark 7:33; 8:23) and spreads it on the man's eyes. The Greek translated here as 'spread' is *chriein*, from which comes the word 'Christ'. The physical action is one of anointing. In a letter coming from John's community which alludes to the sacrament of baptism we read: 'You have been anointed by the Holy One' (1John 2:20), and 'the anointing that you received from him abides in you and teaches you about all things' (1John 2:27). Paul writes: 'It is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts' (2Corinthians 1:21-22).

In a symbolic action that reminds us of the prophet Elisha and Naaman (2Kings 5:10-13), Jesus tells the blind man to go and wash in the waters of Siloam – the same waters that were collected and poured on the altar during the festival of Booths. John explains the root meaning of the word Siloam, thus linking the water with what Jesus has just said about his being sent (9:4). Jesus is carrying out his commission to give to all people the light of life (1:4). The blind man who is a symbol of us all, blinded as we are in our servitude to sin, obeys Jesus. He goes and washes in the waters of the 'wells of salvation' (Isaiah 12:3) and comes back enlightened by Christ.

We recall the promise made through Isaiah: 'On that day out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see' (Isaiah 29:18; see 35:5; 42:7). John is inviting us to have the 'eyes of our hearts enlightened' (Ephesians 1:18) through the sacrament of baptism (see Hebrews 6:4; 10:32).

Act V Scene 2. The interrogation

The man tells his story simply and directly. He has never seen Jesus, for he received his sight only when he obeyed Jesus' word and went and washed in the pool. He knows Jesus' name (9:11), but does not know where Jesus is or how to find him (9:12). So they bring him to the Pharisees. Again he recounts what happened. The Pharisees are divided. Some are impressed by the miraculous nature of what has happened. Others, as in the healing at the pool of Beth-zatha, conclude that Jesus cannot be from God 'for he does not observe the Sabbath' (9:16; compare 5:16-17). Moses had warned them to beware of false prophets with miraculous powers:

If prophets or those who divine by dreams appear among you and promise you omens or portents, and the omens or the portents declared by them take place, and they say, 'Let us follow other gods' (whom you have not known) 'and let us serve them', you must not heed the words of those prophets or those who divine by dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you indeed love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul. The Lord your God you shall follow, him alone you shall fear, his commandments you shall keep, his voice you shall obey, him you shall serve, and to him you shall hold fast.

But those prophets or those who divine by dreams shall be put to death for having spoken treason against the Lord your God – who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery – to turn you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

– Deuteronomy 13:1-5

When they interrogate the man himself he declares that Jesus is 'a prophet'. We are to note a development in belief here. Earlier he had spoken of Jesus simply as a 'man' (9:11).

⁸The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?' ⁹Some were saying, 'It is he.' Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.' ¹⁰But they kept asking him, 'Then how were your eyes opened?'

¹¹He answered, 'The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, "Go to Siloam and wash." Then I went and washed and received my sight.'

¹²They said to him, 'Where is he?' He said, 'I do not know.'

¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes.

¹⁵Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, 'He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.'

¹⁶Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?'

And they were divided.

¹⁷So they said again to the blind man, 'What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.'

He said, 'He is a prophet.'

¹⁸The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹and asked them, 'Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?'

²⁰His parents answered, 'We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.'

²²His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.

²³Therefore his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'

John speaks of the authorities no longer as 'the Pharisees' but as 'the Jews'. All hesitation has gone. They are now totally rejecting Jesus and so are for John symbolic of the hard-line rejection which he and his community were receiving from the Jewish leadership of his time (see commentary on 1:19).

Jesus himself frequented the temple right up to his death (see Luke 21:37; John 18:20) and his disciples continued to worship there (see Luke 24:53; Acts 2:46; 5:42; 21:26). In the Acts of the Apostles we often hear of Paul and his companions preaching in various synagogues. Jesus warns his disciples that they will be flogged in the synagogues (Matthew 10:17, 23:34; Mark 13:9; see Acts 22:19; 26:11). In Luke, Jesus speaks of them being excluded (Luke 6:22) and in John of their being excommunicated (16:2).

There were periods of considerable tension in the early years of the growth of the Christian community between the Jews who joined the disciples of Jesus and those who did not. This may have included individual instances of excommunication, but formal excommunication came only in the 80's after the destruction of Jerusalem, when the Jewish community felt the need to close ranks. They introduced a prayer (a reformulation of the Twelfth Benediction) which it was impossible for Christians to pray without renouncing faith in Jesus.

When John explains the fear experienced by the parents, he may be referring to a specific threat aimed at them by the local authorities. It is more likely, however, that he is writing in the light of the situation between the Jewish synagogue and the Christian community of his own day. He is trying among other things to encourage Christians who are finding the excommunication particularly difficult and are tempted to give up their Christian faith.

The experience of faith leading to a breaking of family relationships was also something with which many in the early Christian communities could identify. Jesus warned that this would happen (Matthew 10:21; 10:35-37), and he was conscious of building a community which would supply the needs created by such a break (Matthew 12:50). His words from the cross to his mother and the beloved disciple have some bearing here.

'Give glory to God' is an expression which we find Joshua using to Achan to encourage him to admit his sin (Joshua 7:19). The Jewish authorities have no doubt that the man is sinning in declaring Jesus to be a prophet, for he is going against their judgment. The irony is obvious. When Jesus first met the blind man he spoke of God's works being revealed in him (9:3), and the man's response here does indeed give glory to God.

Once again he repeats his story. The authorities take their stand on being faithful disciples of Moses. Jesus has already challenged this: 'If you believed Moses, you would believe me' (5:46). It is true that God did speak to Moses and in a way that surpassed any of the prophets (see Numbers 12:2-7), but as John has already said (and this is in keeping with Jewish understanding, see Exodus 33:20): 'No one has ever seen God' (1:18; see 5:37). No one, that is, except 'God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made God known' (1:18). 'He testifies to what he has seen and heard' (3:32). 'He has seen the Father' (6:46).

The irony is compounded when the authorities claim that they do not know where Jesus comes from. They are unaware of how true this is (see 8:14). This is because, as Jesus said on an earlier occasion: 'You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also' (8:19). They do not know God (8:54-55).

24So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, 'Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.'

25He answered, 'I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.'

26They said to him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?'

27He answered them, 'I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?'

28Then they reviled him, saying, 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.'

29We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.'

He is driven out

³⁰**The man answered, 'Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes.**

³¹**We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will.**

³²**Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind.**

³³**If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.'**

³⁴**They answered him, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?'**

And they drove him out.

The man who has been given sight by Jesus is repeating standard Jewish theology when he says that 'God does not listen to sinners'(9:31). He is not claiming that God does not listen to the humble cries of sinners who are genuinely seeking forgiveness. Rather, he is speaking of those who are mouthing prayers, but have no real intention of listening to God.

We might think of the words spoken through Isaiah: 'When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood'(Isaiah 1:15). We might think of Jesus' own teaching: 'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven'(Matthew 7:21).

If we 'worship God and obey his will' our hearts are awake to respond to God when he hears our prayer and offers us his grace. This is why the author of the First Letter of John can write: 'we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him' (1John 3:22). We find the same teaching in the Book of Job:

If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored, if you remove unrighteousness from your tents ... then you will delight yourself in the Almighty, and lift up your face to God. You will pray to him, and he will hear you, and you will pay your vows.

– Job 22:23,26-27

Likewise, James:

Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

– James 5:16

The man suffers the fate of many of John's own community. Because he stays with the truth as he has experienced it, and because he believes that Jesus is 'from God'(9:33), he is rejected (9:34).

ACT V Scene 3. The good shepherd

The authorities have driven away this man who stubbornly refuses to deny his experience, but, as Jesus has already promised: ‘anyone who comes to me I will never drive away’ (6:37). As Wisdom incarnate (see Wisdom 6:16), and, as we shall shortly hear, as the Shepherd, he goes out seeking him, and having found him, he asks him: ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ (9:35). We are reminded of a saying of Jesus recorded by Luke: ‘Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man’ (Luke 6:22). It should be noticed in passing that some Greek manuscripts and the Latin Vulgate read ‘Son of God’ in this verse. It has been suggested that this is an error by a copyist influenced by the more familiar language of the baptism liturgy. Scholars judge that the original text reads ‘Son of Man’.

In the opening chapter of the Gospel we saw that after all the other titles attributed to Jesus by his disciples the one Jesus chose for himself was ‘Son of Man’ (1:51). We have also heard his statement to the authorities: ‘When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realise that I am he’ (8:28). As we have noted on a number of occasions, John has written his Gospel precisely ‘so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name’ (20:31). In the Prologue he introduced Jesus as ‘Christ ... God the only Son’ (1:17-18). Throughout the Gospel, however, he has been insisting that we will fail to understand any of these titles unless we see them in the perspective of ‘the Son of Man’.

It is as the one who has come down from heaven to identify with the poor and the oppressed and who, with them, is vindicated by the judgment of God, that Jesus reveals who God really is and who he is as the Word incarnate. It is ‘because he is the Son of Man that God has given him authority to execute judgment’ (5:27). It is ‘the flesh of the Son of Man’ that we must eat if we are to have life in us. It is the ‘blood of the Son of Man’ that we must drink (6:53).

The blind man was given sight so that he might see the Son of Man. He sees him, and, as a model for all the baptised, he acknowledges Jesus, the Son of Man, as his ‘Lord’ and worships him as his God (9:38).

³⁵Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’

³⁶He answered, ‘And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.’

³⁷Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.’

³⁸He said, ‘Lord, I believe.’ And he worshipped him.

³⁹Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.'

⁴⁰Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?'

⁴¹Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see," your sin remains'.

Jesus then turns towards us and proclaims for all the world to hear: 'I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind'. The second half of this statement echoes words of Isaiah which John will cite in a later passage: 'He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, so that they might not look with their eyes, and understand with their heart and turn – and I would heal them' (12:40, citing Isaiah 6:10; see also Matthew 13:13-15; Acts 28:26-27).

The man at the centre of this scene is an example of enlightenment coming to those who do not see. The authorities, represented here by the Pharisees, object to Jesus' insinuation that they are blind. But Jesus declares that if only they realised how blind they were they might come to him seeking enlightenment. They remain in their sin because of their stubborn insistence that they can see.

We are witnessing an illustration of Jesus' earlier proclamation: 'This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God' (3:19-21).

In the end it is by our acceptance or rejection of the light, and so of Jesus, that we will be judged. Judgment is not in the hands of those who claim the authority to pass judgment on Jesus and on anyone who might believe in him. The blind man is given light by the one who is 'the light of the world'. The Pharisees stand condemned because they were obstinate in their refusal to see. They remain in the dark.

The ancient Israelites were a pastoral people and it is common in their literature for them to speak about themselves as a flock whose shepherd is God. Jacob speaks of ‘the God who has been my shepherd all my life’ (Genesis 48:15). The Psalmist is confident: ‘The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want’ (Psalm 23:1). ‘He is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand’ (Psalm 95:7).

Those who were chosen by God to exercise leadership in the community were spoken of as carrying out the function of shepherds in God’s name. It was said of David: ‘It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel’ (2Samuel 5:2). John uses an unusual word for sheepfold (Greek *aulê*), a word commonly used for the various courts of the temple (see Psalm 99:3-4). Jesus is the Shepherd-Messiah leading the sheep out of these courts (see 2:13-21).

This is a continuation of the previous scene. On one side is the healed man, representative of the flock who have heard the voice of the shepherd and have come to him. They were once lost (blind) but now they see. On the other side are the Pharisees (9:40), representatives of the shepherds (‘the Jews’, 10:19). Not only did they fail to help this man, but when he did find help ‘they drove him out’ (9:34). Centre stage is Jesus, the true shepherd saying to us: ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine’ (Isaiah 43:1).

Jesus is the Lord, the liberator God, who hears the cry of the oppressed and ‘leads them out’ (10:3) ‘to springs of the water of life’ (Revelation 7:17), away from those who use, abuse and enslave them for their own ends (see Psalm 78:52-53). Jesus is inviting us to emulate the blind man in recognising his voice and in following him.

¹Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.

²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.’

⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

A pastoral parable

The other Gospels, too, present Jesus as a shepherd. Matthew introduces him with a quotation from the prophet Micah (5:2): ‘From you Bethlehem shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel’ (Matthew 2:6). He also presents Jesus as the Shepherd-Messiah who, ‘when he saw the crowds, had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd’ (Matthew 9:36; see Mark 6:34 and Numbers 27:17).

We recall Moses’ prayer: ‘Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint someone over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep without a shepherd’ (Numbers 27:16-17; see 1 Kings 22:17). In a setting in which Jesus is critical of the religious leaders, Luke has Jesus telling a story of the joy experienced by a shepherd when he finds a lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7; see also Matthew 18:12). He also records Jesus telling his disciples not to be afraid, and referring to them as his ‘little flock’ (Luke 12:32).

Jesus’ illustration, as we are about to discover, is highly critical of the religious leaders of his day. In this he is continuing a long prophetic tradition. Let us pause to listen to Ezekiel, as there are so many echoes of his words in Jesus’ parable and subsequent explanation:

The word of the Lord came to me: Son of Man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel ... Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered ... with no one to search or seek for them. Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord ... I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them.

– Ezekiel 34:1-10

Since those who have been appointed shepherds are failing in their task, God will do the shepherding:

For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out ... I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness ... and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them ... with good pasture ... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep ... I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak ... I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged.

– Ezekiel 34:11-22

God will raise up a true shepherd for them:

I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.

– Ezekiel 34:23

Jesus identifies himself as the gate (see the commentary on 6:35). When the sheep come in through him they find safety and a home. When they go out through him they find pasture. Jesus is recorded elsewhere as having spoken of the gate as being narrow (Matthew 7:13). That is because to listen to the voice of the shepherd and to follow him is to choose to abandon all other ways. However, the gate is as wide as the arms of Jesus stretched out on the cross, longing to embrace the world.

By contrast ‘all who came before’ Jesus are described as thieves and bandits. From the context it appears that Jesus is speaking about the Pharisees (9:40). The fact that he will speak soon of ‘the Jews’ (10:19) would indicate that his criticism is aimed generally at the religious leadership of his day. That he is aiming his words also at the priests is indicated by the word he uses in verse ten for ‘kill’ (10:10). It is *thuein*, meaning to kill with a view to offering in sacrifice. We are reminded also of Jeremiah’s criticism of those who were turning the temple into a ‘den of bandits’ (Jeremiah 7:11), a criticism echoed by Jesus (Mark 11:17).

Jesus’ criticism is harsh. The religious leaders are ‘thieves and bandits’. They do not know God. They are not listening to God’s Word or carrying out God’s will. They thrust their way into people’s lives ‘by another way’ (10:1) ‘only to steal and kill and destroy’ (10:10). We are reminded of Jesus’ equally harsh criticism found in Matthew chapter twenty-three. Knowing the compassionate heart of Jesus who wept over the failure of his contemporaries to receive God’s offer of peace (Luke 19:41-45), we know that the purpose of such harsh criticisms was to shock into repentance those to whom they were addressed.

Jesus is the shepherd who has come to liberate the sheep from the restrictions imposed on them by the way in which their leaders interpret the Law and the Prophets. He has come that the sheep might live and live abundantly. Paul also speaks of the abundance of grace that is poured out by God for the cleansing of sin (Romans 5:20). How else could God act? ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life’ (3:16).

⁷So again Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.

⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.

⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.

¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

The good shepherd

In the Prologue we were told: 'In the Word was life, and the life was the light of all people'(1:4). To Nicodemus, Jesus said: 'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life'(3:36). He promised the Samaritan woman: 'The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life'(4:14). In the debate that followed his healing of the paralysed man, Jesus said: 'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life'(5:24). In the synagogue at Capernaum, he repeats his earlier assertion: 'Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life'(6:47) and he declares that the life which he is offering consists in communion with him, and therefore with the Father: 'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me'(6:57-58). All of this provides the background to his statement here: 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly'(10:10).

¹¹I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

¹²The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away – and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.

¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

Jesus has already criticised the religious leaders as being strangers whose voice the sheep do not recognise and from whom they run. He has spoken of them as thieves and bandits who have entered the fold by a way other than the gate and have come 'only to steal and kill and destroy'. Now he likens them to cowardly hired hands who have no care for the sheep. By contrast Jesus is 'the good shepherd'. The word translated 'good' is the Greek *kalos*, the normal Greek word for good in the sense of virtuous. It denotes beauty that is the result of balance, proportion, harmony and completion. Jesus is the 'model' shepherd. He is laying down his life for his sheep (10:11,15; also 10:17,18; 1John 3:16; compare Mark 10:45; Luke 22:29).

This focus on Jesus' self-giving love and on Jesus' warning about the wolves that will attack the flock is found also in Paul's exhortation to the elders of the Ephesian church: 'Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son. I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock'(Acts 20:28-29).

When Peter exhorts the elders to ‘tend the flock of God that is in your charge’, he says that he is speaking as ‘a witness of the sufferings of Christ’ (1Peter 5:1-2). As Jesus will say later: ‘No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends’ (15:13). He is offering his life ‘not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God’ (11:52).

Jesus speaks of the sheep as his own (10:14). They have been given to him by the Father (6:37). After all, ‘without him not one thing came into being’ (1:3). He knows the sheep for ‘the Lord knows those who are his’ (2Timothy 2:19). Like the blind man whose sight was restored by Jesus, his sheep know him and recognise his voice, for it is to share in the divine intimacy enjoyed by the Word that they were created. Jesus knows the Father (7:29) who loves him (5:20), and the life that Jesus has come to give us so abundantly is the life which he himself experiences as ‘God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart’ (1:18). The Father wants to ‘speak tenderly’ to us (see Hosea 2:14), and he does so through his Word.

This invitation is not restricted to the sheep of Israel. It is open to the whole world, for Jesus is ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (1:29). It is ‘for the life of the world’ that he gives his flesh (6:51). Indeed, ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life’ (3:16). Jesus is declaring something that had always been present in the faith of Israel. God had promised Abraham: ‘In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’ (Genesis 12:3), and ‘I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations’ (Genesis 17:5; see Romans 4:17). ‘Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered’ (Isaiah 56:8). Paul argues that Jesus came to fulfil the hope expressed in the sacred Scriptures ‘that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, “Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name”; and again he says, “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people”; and again, “Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him”; and again Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope”’ (Romans 15:9-12).

In the other Gospels, we find the same understanding of the universality of Jesus’ mission: ‘I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 8:11). Jesus explains his clearing of the temple by referring back to the words of Isaiah: ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for *all* the nations’ (Mark 11:17; Isaiah 56:7). In his final scene Matthew portrays Jesus commissioning his disciples: ‘Go therefore and make disciples of *all* nations’ (Matthew 28:19; see Mark 16:15).

Others will follow the example of the blind man in listening to the voice of the shepherd whom they know, for ‘whoever is from God hears the words of God’ (8:47). John will have more to say about Jesus’ desire that there be ‘one flock, one shepherd’, when he reflects on the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection in Jesus’ Prayer to his Father at the Last Supper (chapter seventeen).

¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.

¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.'

¹⁹Again the Jews were divided because of these words.

²⁰Many of them were saying, 'He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?' ²¹Others were saying, 'These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?'

Jesus did not come to die. He came to give his life. He came to share with us the intimacy of his communion with his Father. He was killed by those who refused to welcome his revelation, who, as Jesus says, had no room in their hearts for his word (8:37). It was not his being killed that gave us life, it was Jesus' continuing to give himself to us and for us in love, even on the cross. Were he simply a victim of other people's abuse of power, he would be just one more example of the horrible results of human sin.

He was a victim, but he was more. People did take his life from him, but it is not that which is significant. What is significant is that Jesus made of his dying a gift of love. He laid his life down willingly as an act of love. His Father had given him a command, a commission, to reveal God and to save the world. He accepted this command and was faithful to it to the end. He entrusted himself into his Father's embrace even on the cross, knowing that though his enemies might kill him they could not take his life from him. When death became unavoidable, he opened his arms to the cross and embraced it as he embraced everything and everyone. His life was the communion of love which he had with his Father, and he knew that his Father would continue to love him through his dying and would raise him into eternal life.

It is not the cross which saves us. It is the one dying on it who shows us what we can be as human beings and whose love makes it possible for us to follow him. He does this by revealing God as a God who places no limits on his love, and by giving us a share of the Spirit of love that binds him to the Father. Sinful people inflicted the cross upon him. His Father sustained him in love so that he was able to continue to pray, continue to forgive, continue to love, continue to give himself, even as his life was being brutally wrenched from him. He remained free, and in remaining free liberated us who are 'held in slavery by the fear of death'(Hebrews 2:15).

Jesus was willing to lay down his life, not to die but to continue in the intimate life of love which he had with his Father. He laid down his life willingly 'in order to take it up again', and he is encouraging his disciples to do the same, for he has come not that they might die but that 'they may have life and have it abundantly'(10:10). Sharing his life we 'will not die'(6:50). 'Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes'(5:21). The power that makes possible the victory of life over death is the power of love which, like everything else, he has from the Father. 'For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself'(5:26).

John concludes this section with the authorities divided between those who persisted in rejecting Jesus and those who were open to accept him. We are also challenged to choose.

²²At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon.

²⁴So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.'

²⁵Jesus answered, 'I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; ²⁶but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep.

Act IV Scene 4 : During the festival of Dedication

This final confrontation between Jesus and the religious authorities takes place during the feast of Dedication (Hanukkah), popularly known as the feast of lights. It is celebrated on the twenty-fifth day of the winter month of Kislev to commemorate the dedication of the temple by Judas Maccabaeus after it had been desecrated by the army of Antiochus Epiphanes IV in 164BC (see 1Maccabees 4:59). The close connection between this and the previous scene will become obvious in verses twenty-six to twenty-eight.

The outer courts of the temple were closed in on the four sides by long covered colonnades which were open to the inside but had a solid outer wall closing the temple precincts off from the surrounding area. The portico of Solomon was on the east side, protecting the temple courts from the cold wind sweeping in from the east and up the Kidron valley.

'The Jews' (see 1:19) ask Jesus: 'If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly'. This is only the first of a number of close parallels with Luke's account of Jesus' interrogation by the Jewish council (Luke 22:67-71). Jesus was introduced to us as 'Jesus Christ' in the Prologue (1:17), and John will later declare that he is writing so that we might 'come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah' (20:31).

The subject of Jesus being the Messiah has come up a number of times. When Andrew spoke of Jesus to his brother, Simon, he declared: 'We have found the Messiah' (1:41). Jesus claimed to be the Messiah when speaking with the Samaritan woman (4:25-26). The crowd were discussing the matter in chapter seven (see 7:26,27,31,41,42). In the scene with the blind man John informed us that 'the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue' (9:22).

In the present scene, because 'the Jews' have a wrong understanding of Messiah, Jesus answers their question indirectly. Rather than use the title, he points to his actions. Since he is doing what the Messiah is to do, they should be able to draw their own conclusions (compare 5:36 and Matthew 11:26).

Though Jesus is walking freely in his Father's house, his enemies surround him like a pack of wolves. He has just told them of his personal freedom in relation to his death (see 10:18). Now he tells them that he will protect his own with the protective power of God, whom, once again, he calls 'my Father'. He will do this because, as he declares: 'the Father and I are one'.

If they were to look at what Jesus is doing they would recognise the liberator God at work. In Paul's words, they would see that 'in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself' (2Corinthians 5:19). As Jesus said earlier: 'The Father is still working, and I also am working' (5:17). God is drawing people to Jesus and no one will be able to separate them 'from the love of God in Christ Jesus' (Romans 8:39). They should have known this from Isaiah: 'I am God, and also henceforth I am He; there is no one who can deliver from my hand; I work and who can hinder it?' (Isaiah 43:13). Jesus has already said that he always does what pleases his Father (8:29). This unity of will comes from an even more profound unity. Jesus is one with God at the deepest level of his being, and it is this intimate union that he is showing in all that he does and says.

Once before when he spoke of God as his Father they were seeking to kill him for, in their judgment, he was 'making himself equal to God' (5:18). They failed to understand that Jesus was not making himself anything. He is 'in the beginning' the Word who is with God (1:1). He is 'God the only Son' (1:18). On that occasion Jesus defended himself against their accusation, speaking of his having received everything that he is from the Father. On a second occasion when he identified with the sacred name ('I am'), they took up stones to carry out the punishment for blasphemy required by the Law (8:59).

Now Jesus is claiming to be one with the Father. As on the two previous occasions, they sense, rightly, that Jesus is claiming something more than being God's Messiah. For the first time they explicitly accuse Jesus of blasphemy, though it is implied in 8:59, and they take up stones again to kill him for 'making himself God'. They have learned nothing.

²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.

²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.

²⁹What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand.

³⁰The Father and I are one.'

³¹The Jews took up stones again to stone him.

³²Jesus replied, 'I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?'

³³The Jews answered, 'It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God.'

³⁴Jesus answered, 'Is it not written in your law, "I said, you are gods"?'

³⁵If those to whom the word of God came were called 'gods' – and the scripture cannot be annulled – ³⁶can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, 'I am God's Son'?

³⁷If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. ³⁸But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.'

³⁹Then they tried to arrest him again, but he escaped from their hands. ⁴⁰He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptising earlier, and he remained there.

⁴¹Many came to him, and they were saying, 'John performed no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true.' ⁴²And many believed in him there.

Jesus appeals to the Law upon which they claim to be basing their rejection of him. John uses the word 'Law' regularly in its widest usage to cover all Scripture. Jesus quotes from Psalm 82. The psalm in its entirety reads as follows:

God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:
'How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?
Give justice to the weak and the orphan;
maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.
Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked'.
They have neither knowledge nor understanding they walk around in darkness;
all the foundations of the earth are shaken.
'I say, "You are gods,
children of the Most High, all of you;
nevertheless, you shall die like mortals,
and fall like any prince"'.
Rise up, O God, judge the earth;
for all the nations belong to you!

If, as is likely, this psalm is pre-Israelite, we are to imagine that the chief god is being presented as calling the lesser gods together to castigate them and to threaten that they will be deprived of their immortal status as gods and die as mortals die if they do not act justly. In early Israelite understanding and use of the psalm, the chief god is Yahweh who is portrayed as condemning the lesser gods for their failure to exercise justice by caring for the poor and oppressed. Later, after the dawn of monotheistic awareness in Judaism, the 'gods' were reinterpreted as angels or as those responsible for administering justice in God's name. It was understood in this way at the time of Jesus.

Jesus' argument is this: If according to the Scripture it is proper, because of the divine power which they exercise, to call 'gods' those who are vehicles of God's word, all the more so is it proper for him who is God's Word to claim 'I am God's Son'.

The title 'Son of God' in the singular occurs only three times in the First Testament and each time it refers to the king (2Samuel 7:14; Psalm 2:7; Psalm 89:27-28). The language seems to be borrowed from the Egyptian court, but in the sacred writings of Israel it is made clear that the king is son only by adoption and only from the day of his consecration. It is probable that 'Son of God' was a title used of the Messiah at the time of Jesus. In John's text it carries something of this Messianic reference (compare the claim made by the Baptist, 1:34, and by Nathanael, 1:49). It carries also a reference to Jesus as the exalted Christ, ruling as lord from God's 'throne' in heaven. The title 'Son of God' took on a deeper significance for the disciples of Jesus as they continued their reflections on the special relationship that existed between Jesus and God.

In the Prologue we were told that Jesus is 'the Word'(1:1), 'God the only Son'(1:18). Jesus himself does not explicitly claim to be God's Word. He does claim to be God's Son and to have been sanctified by the Father and sent into the world, and to be doing what his Father sent him to do. To be sanctified by God is to be chosen and set apart. The claim to have been sanctified takes on a special significance when we recall that the festival of Dedication was celebrating the re-consecration of the temple. Jesus, 'the Holy One of God'(6:69) is claiming to be the new tabernacle (1:18), the new temple (2:21). We recall earlier references to Jesus as the Son, notably in the exultant hymn that concludes the scene with Nicodemus:

'God so loves the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life'(3:16; also 3:17-18).

'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life'(3:36).

In a similar vein, during the discourse after the multiplication of the loaves Jesus says:

'This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life'(6:40).

And in his debate with the religious authorities, Jesus says:

'If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed'(8:36).

The proof he offers in this present scene for the truth of his claim that 'the Father and I are one' (10:30) is that he is doing his Father's will and carrying out the mission given him. If they would only free themselves from their prejudices and open their minds and hearts to see what he is doing and to listen to his word they would 'know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father'(10:38).

John is no philosopher and he does not attempt, as later Christians will attempt, to speak of the relationship between Jesus and his Father at the level of their essential being. His focus throughout the Gospel is on portraying who Jesus is because of the unique intimacy which Jesus has with his Father, shown in the complete unity of will which is evident to those willing to look at his words and actions.

The Son of God

Let us pause here to recall earlier statements that reflect the intimate communion of Jesus and his Father:

‘It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made God known’(1:18).

‘The Spirit remained on him’(1:32).

‘The one who comes from heaven testifies to what he has seen and heard’(3:31-32).

‘He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure’(3:34).

‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work’(4:34).

‘The Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing’(5:19-20).

‘Just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself’(5:26).

‘I can do nothing on my own ... I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me’(5:30).

‘It is on the Son of Man that God the Father has set his seal’(6:27).

‘I have come down from heaven to do the will of him who sent me’(6:38).

‘The one who is from God has seen the Father’(6:46).

‘The living Father has sent me and I live because of the Father’(6:57).

‘I know him because I am from him and he sent me’(7:29).

‘If you knew me you would know my Father also’(8:19).

‘I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him’(8:28-29).

‘I know him and I keep his word’(8:55).

‘The Father knows me and I know the Father ... The Father loves me’(10:15,17).

The ‘Jews’ will not countenance such a claim. As on an earlier occasion, they try to arrest him (10:39; see 7:30). Again they fail. John takes us back with Jesus to where he began his story, to the place where John had been baptising (1:28) and our hearts are uplifted in hope as we learn that ‘many believed in him there’(10:42). For many chapters now we have been watching the light shining in the darkness. Not only is the darkness unable to overcome the light, but many are following in the footsteps of the blind man. They are being enlightened by the One whom God has sent into the world to save the world by sharing with all who are willing the intimacy of love which he enjoys as the Word of God, ‘God the only Son who is close to the Father’s heart’ (1:18).