

4 Easter – Year C – April 25, 2010
Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30
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The State of Arizona very recently became one where law enforcement officers will soon have interesting new powers. More specifically, if they have any reasonable cause to suspect that you or I are not in the country legally by birth, naturalization, as permanent residents, or holders of an appropriate visa, they may now take action including detention, questioning, fines and, of course, deportation. In several other countries of the world, it has long been possible for those who consider themselves citizens of God's kingdom, especially members of Christ's Body, to be forcibly detained, persecuted, and subject to violence of many different forms.

I think it highly likely that Jesus knew exactly how any of us might feel to be challenged about our identity, and what we take for granted as inalienable rights. Identity is a significant theme of today's Gospel lesson. Jesus is in Jerusalem for the winter festival of Dedication. Being a Jewish festival, celebrated even to this day, perhaps that description doesn't mean a whole lot to most of us. We know it more commonly as the eight-day celebration of Hanukkah. A festival marked by the lighting of eight candles on consecutive days. Historically, the festival of light marks the commemoration of the rededication of the second Temple in Jerusalem by the courageous Maccabean family around 165 B.C. The Temple was profaned by Antiochus IV, whose aim was to stamp out Jewish monotheistic worship of Yahweh, the one God, and institute Hellenistic polytheistic worship of multiple Greek gods. The Temple was purified, and rededicated to God, by burning ritual oil for eight days. The miracle of this festival is that there was only enough oil left for one day, and yet the menorah burned for all eight days. For you and I, who know Jesus as the Light of the world from the prologue to John's gospel, there is significant irony in the details. Jesus, the Light of life is walking in the winter's darkness and about to be surrounded by those who live in their own type of darkness and do not recognize Him.

As Jesus walks along the Temple portico of Solomon, the Jewish leaders gather around him. That is to say, they crowded around him, which we might well construe as rather threatening and then demand of Him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Let's just say that the approach to Jesus here is verbally and physically less than friendly. One way to translate the Judean leaders' question is "Why do you plague us?" Another is, "Why are you taking away our life?" It gives us a sense of the hostile spirit behind this gathering. In the original Greek, "gathered" can also be construed as "siege". What is at stake is proof of Jesus' identity. Proof that He has the right to do the work He is doing, in God's name. Proof that He is no threat to the livelihood of the Judean leaders as teachers of the Law. Proof that the shepherd loves and cares for His sheep so much that He will die for them. Proof that Jesus alone can say that He is one with God the Father: one in purpose, intention, and authority. One in word, and one in action.

Why does Jesus' identity matter so much? For the Judean leaders it is a real struggle with tradition and everything they have come to expect in the person of Messiah. In the Gospels we see and hear how with every fiber of their being, they are resisting the possibility that Jesus really is who He claims to be. Thousands of years of tradition, along with their own obvious distaste for Jesus' teachings, as well His numerous deeds of power on behalf of others are like a sack of stones dragging on the backs and in the hearts of these questioners. You can almost feel the power of the tremendous push and pull of the tension here. The predominant notion is that this uneducated, scruffy looking peasant preacher from Nazareth in Galilee can't possibly be the promised Messiah. That despite how His works testify and witness to God's power working in and through Him. His teaching is nothing like they expect. He argues against centuries of rabbinical tradition, presuming to reinterpret the Law. He apparently preaches peace at every opportunity, encouraging the giving of alms, without a call to arms. He has not come with great power and a mighty army to usurp the Roman rulers. And perhaps worst of all, his

choice of companions leaves a lot to be desired. In short, for the Judean leaders, the unpalatable truth of Jesus is that God appears to have misunderstood their order of prime rib and a good bottle of wine, and served them instead with the equivalent of an indigestible sloppy joe, and a can of soda. Jesus offends their idea and their ideology of Messiahship.

There are still plenty of people in the world who find Jesus offensive. There are also plenty of people who still find Jesus' model for living difficult at best, and easy to rationalize at worst. In witness the Gospel accounts testify that Jesus never compromises in His teaching of God's truth or the truth about living a life of faith and obedience. He never lies or makes light of the fact that faith in Him will go hand in hand with suffering. Jesus heals the sick, restores and builds community without prejudice or boundaries. Just like the prophets of old, Jesus stands in solidarity with, and defends the rights of the poor, the outcasts and undesirables, as well as those on the fringes and margins of mainstream society. He never wavers in His love, compassion, and concern for all, even those who nailed Him to the cross. Jesus gives abundant life. He consistently offers God's mercy and forgiveness, and tirelessly promotes God's justice on earth. Why does Jesus' identity matter to me and to you? It matters because money or any other kind of material wealth will only ever bring fleeting worldly happiness, and can never replace divine joy. The worship of any earthly idol cannot offer me true freedom, or forgiveness for my sins. Jesus' identity as my savior and Lord matters because he alone has the power to conquer death and sin; by His wounds we are healed. Jesus' gift is everlasting life. He alone has the power to transform our lives into lives with purpose, filled with love and marked by peace. He alone gives us the strength to love those that the world hates, to serve those whom the world reject and despise. The power of Jesus' love works in our hearts so that we can look beyond our selfish temporal interests to see Christ, rejected, scorned and spit upon in the face of every stranger that we are called to serve. Jesus' identity matters because only love can defeat evil and violence, and because we are the physical presence of God's Body of love in and to this world. It matters because Jesus' death and resurrection *is* the single most profound and unrepeatable act of God's saving grace for the life of the world, healing and reconciling all who believe in Him to God the Father. Jesus identity matters because if we are to follow Him, it defines who we are in this world, what our values are, and how we function in His name. Scholar and author, C.S. Lewis, says it this way, "You must make your choice. Either [Jesus] was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or ... worse."

By God's grace, we make our choices in every word and deed, every day of our lives, either for or against Christ. There are no neutral decisions. Living in darkness is akin to living a life based in fear, grasping for tenuous threads of hope, and demanding proof of Jesus' identity, because our ideologies are challenged. Walking in the light of Christ is a life of faith, experiencing the confident hope of everlasting life, and our Savior's goodness and love as the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. As adopted sons and daughters of God, we are clothed in righteousness through our savior Jesus Christ. Standing in His grace the works that you and I do also testify to Jesus' identity. As Jesus, the Good Shepherd says, "my sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me." What is Jesus saying to us today? Is the light of Christ in our hearts burning with God's desire for justice, mercy and compassion? Have we truly embraced the gift of abundant life and love in Jesus' name? Where is Jesus leading us to serve others in His name this day? Jesus is the head of a new temple. You and I are His hands, feet and mouths in the world. We too can rejoice and celebrate because the Light of the world is here, and the darkness will never overcome Him.

Amen.