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Easter 4
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The Good Shepherd

TEXT: John 10:22-30

(Trans) Then it came the Dedication in Jerusalem (and) it was winter. ²³ And Jesus was walking in the temple in the cloister of Solomon. ²⁴ Therefore the Jews encircled him and said to him, “Until when our soul are you lifting up, if you are the Christ, tell us! openly. ²⁵ Jesus answered them, “I told you and you are not believing. The works that I am doing in the name of my Father these are witnessing concerning me. ²⁶ But you are not believing, because you are not from my sheep. ²⁷ My sheep my voice hear, and I know them and they follow me. ²⁸ And I give them eternal life and no one might destroy them into the age and no one will seize them from out of my hand. ²⁹ My father the one who gives to me is greater than everything, and no one is able to seize out of the Father’s hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one.”

JESUS’ SHEEP HEAR HIS VOICE, AND SO SPEAK OF HIM ALONE

Introduction

These days god is in the news. A lot. Just the other day Deb was watching “The Daily Show” on Comedy Central and they did a whole segment called “This Week in God.” So I thought I might do my very own version of “This Week In God” this morning. First of all, we had the special this week on PBS about the President’s “faith life” and how it’s affected his job. We had an NBC news special here in Philadelphia about “life after death.” We also have the whole controversy surrounding the words “one nation, under God” in the pledge of allegiance. And, of course, this week we’ll celebrate the National Day of Prayer.

All this talk about god should lead us to ask: which god? To day we believe in one God is a confession in and of itself. There are, clearly, lots of people who believe in no God at all. But to state who we believe that God *is* is another sort of confession altogether. What “God” are we talking about? Is it enough simply to use the word “God” or do we really need to be more specific? To which “God” will people be praying on May 6, the National Day of Prayer?

ILLUS: Dirk Gently is the hero of Douglas Adams’ “Holistic Detective Agency” series. The cover for one of the books says this: “When a passenger check-in desk at London’s Heathrow Airport disappears in a ball of orange flame, the explosion is deemed an act of God. But which god? What god would be hanging around Heathrow trying to catch the 3:37 [flight] to Oslo?”

I. What is the American God?

If I ask someone “which God” they’re talking about, the answer I usually get is, “the right one.” Maybe more seriously, people will say “the God America was founded under.” It is certainly true that the founders of the United States were theists: they believed in God.

We can be even more specific, and say that they were monotheists: they believed there was only *one* God.

But which god? And what was he doing in America in 1776? Let's consider for a few moments who the founding fathers of the United States believed God to be.

Thomas Jefferson wrote this in his autobiography of 1821: "Where the preamble declares, that coercion is a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion, an amendment was proposed by inserting 'Jesus Christ,' so that it would read 'A departure from the plan of Jesus Christ, the holy author of our religion;' the insertion was rejected by the great majority, in proof that they meant to comprehend, within the mantle of its protection, the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mohammedan, the Hindoo and Infidel of every denomination." (Thomas Jefferson in his *Autobiography*, 1821; from *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, New York: Library of America, 1984, p. 40.)

Benjamin Franklin wrote in his own autobiography: "My parents had early given me religious impressions, and brought me through my childhood piously in the dissenting [puritan] way. But I was scarce 15 when, after doubting by turns of several points as I found them disputed in the different books I read, I began to doubt of Revelation it self. Some books against deism [the belief that god is creator, but we doesn't interfere in earthly affairs] fell into my hands; they were said to be the substance of sermons preached at [Robert] Boyle's lectures. It happened that they wrought an effect on me quite contrary to what was intended by them; for the arguments of the deists, which were quoted to be refuted, appeared to me much stronger than the refutations; in short, I soon became a thorough deist." (Benjamin Franklin, [Autobiography](#); from [Autobiography And Other Writings](#), New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 58.)

Thomas Paine, wrote in his book "The Age of Reason": "The study of theology, as it stands in the Christian churches, is the study of nothing; it is founded on nothing; it rests on no principles; it proceeds by no authority; it has no data; it can demonstrate nothing; and it admits of no conclusion." (Thomas Paine, [The Age of Reason](#), Part II, 1795; from [Thomas Paine: Collected Writings](#), NY: Library of America, 1995, p. 826.)

One last quote from Thomas Jefferson: ""It is not to be understood that I am with him [Jesus Christ] in all his doctrines. I am a Materialist; he takes the side of Spiritualism; he preaches the efficacy of repentance toward forgiveness of sin; I require a...good works to [go along with] it. Among the sayings and discourses imputed to him by his biographers, I find... so much absurdity, so much untruth and imposture, as to pronounce it impossible that such contradictions should have proceeded from the same being. I...leave [this] to the stupidity of some and the roguery of others of his disciples." (Thomas Jefferson, letter to William Short, April 13, 1820, *Works*, Vol. 4., p. 320.)

Who is god, to the people who founded this nation on a god? Is it the god to which most Americans pledge allegiance? Is it the god of the Muslims, Hindus or other infidels, the god of Thomas Jefferson? Are they all one and the same?

Who is Jesus, to them, to the Founding Fathers? Is he a man with no authority or data, as Thomas Paine believed? Was he a great man, but no more, as Ben Franklin and his Masonic brothers believed?

Who is the god under which our nation stands?

I want to make it clear that these were GREAT men. Our country would be better off with more men like them. They were: intelligent and forward thinking. They were always striving for equity even for their time. They were committed to the good of society, even if they didn't always agree on what was good for society and its members.

And we all know people like that: family members who are kind and generous, friends and neighbors who are upstanding, reputable citizens. As far as this world goes, they are striving to follow the Laws the Lord has laid down. But when it comes to the question of God, all of that is irrelevant.

Do you think the leaders of the Jews that confronted Jesus were all stupid? Do you think they didn't get their positions by being somewhat reputable? With the exception of Caiphias, who even the Jews hated, most of them were fine, upstanding citizens.

But it didn't matter. Because they were not God's sheep.

II. Who is the Christian God?

In the midst of all this confusion over god and gods comes the voice of the Good – the Noble – Shepherd. “I and the Father are one.” “My sheep hear my voice.” Jesus is the only God that can ever command a Christian's allegiance. His sheep trust and believe in him alone. In Jesus, all ambiguity about God is done away with, and we see God as he truly is, in history, living and dying and rising again for his sheep.

When reflecting on this truth about Jesus Christ, Luther wrote: “If you do not worship and embrace this King, you cannot worship God, for the Father and the Son are one (John 10:30). It is, therefore, vain for the Turk, vain for the pope, vain for the monk, to speculate about God aside from Christ. For the Turk says he adores the God who made heaven and earth. The Jew says the same. [ed: I would add that all the founding fathers also believed in the god who made heaven and earth.] But because [they all] deny that this King is the Son of God, they not only wander away from God, but also adore an idol of their own heart. For they invent a god such as they wish to have, not as God has revealed Himself. But God detests them and closes His ears to their prayers. For He wishes to hear and see no one except through His Son. (Psalm 8:1, Luther)

God detests this profession of a false god, and closes his ears to their prayers. They are not his sheep. They do not wish Jesus to be their shepherd.

When Blaise Pascal had his great conversion experience to truth faith, he wrote in his journal that he felt fire, an unquenchable fire. Then he wrote down furiously: “I believe

in god! Not the god of the philosophers or the mathematicians, but the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” The God of the Scriptures. Jesus Christ.

What has the god of the deists, muslims, jews and masons done for you lately?

Where was he when you lost your job?

Where was he when your marriage fell apart?

Where was he when you got cancer?

Can he claim to be your shepherd?

Can he claim to lead you to green pastures and by still waters?

Has he made a table for you in the midst of your enemies?

Has he made your cup run over?

My Jesus – my God – was born for me.

He teaches me the way of truth and the way of life

He brings me to the green pastures of his Word

He fills a cup with his own blood and gives it to me out of love

He has anointed me with a water that will save me from death

He suffered and died of crucifixion out of an unlimited love for me

That’s my God – that’s my good shepherd.

I KNOW WHO HE IS.

As for this nameless god who supposedly created the universe, but didn’t bother to give me his name or number, what use should any of us have for him? I will pray to one God alone – Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior and Good Shepherd.

Conclusion

ILLUS: “To the doors!” Deb played for a wedding at a Ukrainian Catholic Church in Chester the other weekend, and I had a chance to read through their liturgy – the great 5th century liturgy of John Chrysostom. When it came time to say the Creed, the deacon would cry out “to the doors!” At that point all the ones who had not been received into communion would leave. Closed communion started with the creed – the most sacred pledge of allegiance you will ever make. We just made it. And every time we say those words we identify ourselves as sheep of the Good and Noble Shepherd, who laid down his life for his sheep.

Fellow members of the blood-bought flock of Jesus– hear the voice of your shepherd. He loves you with an everlasting love. He alone of all gods was willing to die for you. He alone can tell you what god is like, because he alone is the face of god in this world. Sheep – hear the voice of your shepherd For no one can snatch you out of his hand. Amen.