

Forth Sunday of Easter

As a point of historic interest, one might note that in the five verses prior to today's gospel verses, John notes that it is the Feast of the Dedication in Jerusalem. It's cold. It's winter. And, this gospel scene takes place as Jesus is walking about in the temple area on the Portico of Solomon. He is surrounded by Jews who are prodding him to reveal his true nature. After all Jesus has said and done, they want Him to confirm that He is the Christ!

More history to frame the event: The Feast of Dedication is Hanukkah, a Jewish holiday commemorating the rededication of the Holy Temple (the 2nd Temple) in Jerusalem at the time of the Maccabean Revolt against the Seleucid Empire. It is observed for 8 nights and days, starts on the 25th day of Kislev (by Hebrew calendar) and may fall at any time from late November to late December in the Gregorian calendar. Also called the Festival of Lights and the Feast of Dedication. Celebrated by lighting the candles of a nine branch menorah candelabrum. One branch, usually the center is a ninth candle and is used to light the other candles. Each night an additional candle is lit until the eighth night when all the candles are lit together – denoting the final night of the holiday. This celebration confirms that this gospel event occurred between late November and late December. Candles and oil lamps would be burning from the windows of every home. As oil and candles were expensive, this was an extravagance indulged by most Jews.

These events are meaningful as John, the beloved one, places Jesus teaching in this backdrop of a Jewish liturgical feast. Let me insert just a little more history to frame the celebration more clearly. A Syrian King, Antiochus Epiphanes, (175-164 BC) made significant effort (persuasion at first) to force Greek culture, religion and philosophy on the Jewish people. They refused. He resorted to force. Death to anyone who circumcised a child, or had a copy of the Law (first 5 books of the Bible). King Epiphanes meant to eradicate the Jewish religion. His troops pushed hard to accomplish their King's desires. The temple rooms were used for despicable, vile things. They even put a statue of Zeus on the altar. They plundered the gold and money of the temple. Then came revolution. Judas Maccabeus and his brother went to war for some six years until they defeated the King's army and regained control of Jerusalem and the temple in 164 BC. They cleansed and purified the temple, rebuilt the altar and reconstructed and replaced all that was needed to restore what was needed for the liturgy. The Festival of Lights recalls this event. The tradition of putting a light in the window of every home was a reminder and celebration of their religious and political freedom.

Now, let us return to the gospel scene: So, Jesus is standing in the light of the menorah in the temple. He is letting the Jewish leadership know in no uncertain terms who He is and his connection with God, his message of salvation. The Jewish leaders, of course, wanted Christ dead for what they perceived as his blasphemy. However, to be clear, this was not true of all the Jewish leadership. Much of the Jewish populace had no such feelings for Jesus. Certain leadership, who felt threatened by Jesus, wanted Jesus dead. He usurped their power among the people. They could see much of the populace looked upon Him as a holy man, a leader, one who brought them hope and salvation. Jesus reminded the leadership of the good works he had performed. He essentially laid out the logic of what He had done and said to give them a different perspective of who He was. Logically, there could be little doubt about how Christ's deeds reflected the goodness and love of his message; how could this behavior and these deeds, not be of God?

So, these certain Jewish leaders, in their corruptness, their ego centric desire for power and control, could not see the Light and the Truth, The Good Shepherd. They could not comprehend His message of love and salvation. They could only see an enemy who must be eliminated to insure the continuance of their power. They would not change. But, the message for us is clear. We have a choice. Every day, in so many small things we do, we can make the choice regarding who we serve.

As our beloved St. Mother Teresa advised - "Let nothing come between you and Jesus." **Peace be with you.**