



St Marylebone
Parish Church

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Festival of the Dedication of the Temple, or Hannukah, takes place at the winter solstice every year.

It was feast instituted by the great Jewish hero, Judas Maccabaeus, who had, after eleven years, in 164 BC, against all the odds, managed to restore Jewish worship to the Temple in Jerusalem after removing the altar and all the statues of Greek gods and goddesses set up under the hated Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

The feast was, inevitably, a time of heightened political and religious sensitivity and tension; a time when crowds would gather and press for answers and want a piece of the action.

“Are you the Christ?”, “Are you the Messiah?” they demand of Jesus.

“Are you a new and greater Judas Maccabaeus?”

“Are you going to get rid of the Romans in the way that Judas Maccabaeus got rid of the Greeks?”.

Yet again, however, the crowd is not satisfied by any of Jesus’ answers.

What Jesus says is equivocal, mysterious; more of the “if you have ears to hear and eyes to see” stuff which has infuriated them before.

How could anyone understand what he was saying or who he was without fully buying-in to how he himself understood his relationship to God the Father? How he himself had come to understand what the Father’s work for him was to be? How he had come to discern what kind of Messiah he would be?

So, Jesus tells it to them straight, “Look I have already spelled this out to you in words of one syllable. I have shown you in and through my actions. I have explained the Hebrew Scriptures to you and still you don’t - or rather won’t, understand. No matter what I do or say, or how I act, you inevitably choose to put your own backward-looking gloss on this; you stick rigidly and unmoveable to your prejudices, you won’t budge!

The new type of messiahship Jesus offers, has to start with a blank page.

Jesus is not the sort of messiah who will simply be another Judas Maccabaeus and ride at the head of an army.

The inherited blueprint of messiahship, says Jesus, has to be torn up and thrown away. Those who come to him have to do so with open hearts and minds; they have to listen to him with fresh ears and interpret what he does with fresh eyes - just as those whom he calls “his sheep’ are doing.

Archbishop William Temple, writing in 1941, wrote that this radically new model of messiahship, based on suffering and sacrifice, rather than on military victory and the expulsion of unwelcome occupying forces, could only *just* be grasped by the innermost group of Jesus’ disciples and that, even then, they could not fully grasp what Jesus meant; they could not fully comprehend even who he was until after the Resurrection, when things began, gradually, slowly, to fall into place and make some senseⁱ.

During the Feast of Dedication, those who follow him, implies, Jesus, may never taste victory in the way that those who question him might envisage it; those who follow him, those who come to him with open hearts and minds; those who listen to him with fresh ears and interpret what he does with fresh eyes might well suffer loss, humiliation, persecution, hardship – and be thought of as complete and utter failures but – in the end – they *will* be safe and the victory *will* be theirs

because they will be his and they will be the ones who will share in his ultimate victory over sin and death and darkness and decay.

No wonder then, that, once again and all too predictably, those who have gathered to question Jesus but don't like what he says, pick up stones and try to kill him.

No-one throughout history has been able to account for the Church without referring to the Resurrection; to the women and men who, very quickly, came to know the truth of what Jesus had proclaimed in the Temple during that Feast of Hannukah.

St Paul, writing to the Romansⁱⁱ, perhaps on the way to his execution, summed up the unshakeable conviction which kept the Church growing and flourishing in the face of every Roman and Jewish attempt to snuff it out:

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus . . . we are heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ . . . and the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. If God is for us, who can be against us? Who can bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? Who can condemn those who God has acquitted? Who can separate us from Christ? Hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril and sword never can! In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

May those words be our words, may they shape our everyday living - and our dying - and may Christ's victory be ours. Alleluia!

ⁱ Temple, W., Readings in St John's Gospel, 1941, Macmillan and Co., p.171

ⁱⁱ cf. Romans 8.1 & 31 - 38