

**Easter 4**  
**21/4/2013**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Acts 9:36-43**

**Psalm 23**

**Revelation 7:9-17**

**John 10:22-30**

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How long will you keep us in suspense?

Or, perhaps more accurately, how long will you keep bugging us? How long will you keep annoying us?

If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly!

It seems to be part of the human condition to want plain answers – yes or no. It doesn't necessarily matter what the answer is, so long as we know clearly, and can act on the basis of the right expectations. We want to be certain about things, according to the criteria we set.

How do I know God is real? Is there some particular feeling that convinces me? Butterflies in the tummy. That adrenalin rush at the Easter camp? That sense I can do no other? The successful deals I've made with God: if you do this for me, I'll do that for you?

Or maybe you're in the 'everything happens for a reason' camp. Whatever happens, I can construe it as an act of God offered in love. Evil has been retrenched. Whatever is, is what it is. No lament. No outrage. No chafing at the bit. Every question has a plain answer: it was meant to be.

The trouble is, even the simplest answers break down in changed circumstances. Never cross the road without holding Mum's hand. Never wear green with blue. Never touch a box of matches. Never hold hands. Never play cards. Never get divorced. Never kill another person. Never be greedy or jealous. Never cross this boundary.

The people who gathered around Jesus in our gospel story today had a question prompted by the occasion. As you may well know, the Jewish annual Feast of Dedication, which we know as Hanukkah, looked back to a time when Israel had been ruled by a corrupt and cruel foreign king, whose notoriety took a whole new turn for the worse when he conducted a pagan sacrifice within the temple, the house of God. The feast celebrated the action of Judas Maccabeus and his brothers who reclaimed the temple, purified it and rededicated it.

Many thought he was the Messiah, but time proved otherwise. Despite their best hopes, the nation of Israel was still vulnerable to foreign powers, and the temple still vulnerable to desecration or destruction, as the first readers of this story knew to their deep sorrow. So the question to Jesus *is* a question seeking a clear answer. Yes or no: are *you* the one who will do what Judas failed to do? Are you the one who will secure our nation and our house of God?

The problem is that they are looking for a Messiah defined by pre-determined criteria. They want to know he ticks all their boxes before they'll commit to him.

Pre-determined criteria are even more of a plague than the 'everything happens for a reason' argument. Pre-determined criteria allow us to define our answer before we ask the question. We see it in the so-called debate about atheism. Christianity is not valid because it does not satisfy criteria that do not apply to it. No discussion of the criteria is allowed, no matter how invalid they may be in any form of discourse, let alone religious discourse. We see it in the responses of those who have rejected the church because they don't find a god who punishes attractive. We see it in the musings of the self-named Progressives, who are revisiting the 20<sup>th</sup> century's scholarly theological and biblical work, seeking rational objective answers to subjective paradoxical questions, as if they didn't know that the only end in sight for that enterprise is the 'death of God'. We see it in our children who imagine their primary school age pre-conceptual understanding of Christianity is all there is to bring the question.

How long will you keep annoying us?

If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly!

Jesus' answer is indeed plain, but not in the way they meant. Jesus makes it clear that pre-defined criteria cannot be used to get a handle on who he is and what can be expected. It is not just that Jesus transcends and transforms all categories. We are not simply talking about a new set of criteria, a new conceptual framework or paradigm set. We are talking about defining a living, changing, responding, incarnate Son of God.

Specific criteria are always contextual, always vulnerable to change. Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and forever, is the Jesus Christ who enters our world and responds to what he finds – or more correctly, whom he finds. 'This is how we've always done it' doesn't wash anymore. 'This is how we do it' is always provisional. Our reading of Scripture, our understanding of doctrine is always provisional. If we do not regard it as provisional we risk idolatry. For these things are only tools in our engagement with the living God made known to us in Jesus Christ .

We cannot define Jesus, we can only enter into relationship with him. And fundamentally this is a relationship of structure, not feeling. It is the relationship of belonging. It is the acceptance of an invitation to place ourselves where Jesus is, to stick with him and follow after him wherever it takes us. It is an invitation that defines *us*. My sheep hear my voice and follow. My sheep belong to me.

So why is this not also provisional? How is this fundamentally different from what those questioners sought? It is different, and not provisional, because in his rising from the dead, God shows that this saviour is never vulnerable to the passage of time or the crumbling of context. Jesus can never be shown to be a passing hope, because not even death can take him from us. Our abiding with God can never be interrupted, because the living God dwells in the risen Jesus as God's temple, the locus of our mutual belonging.

How long will you keep annoying us? We too might ask the question.

As long as it takes, he replies, for you to learn to be willing to respond to me beyond the limitations of your own terms. As long as it takes for you to know you belong with me. As long as it takes for you to hear and believe and follow. As long as it takes for you to know I am the Good Shepherd of the sheep.

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