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Believing the Works of God (John 10. 22-39)

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One of the things that's puzzled me over the years about the post-Easter readings set by the lectionary is how quickly we're plunged into some of the most impenetrable sections of John's gospel. Following Easter day, there's usually a couple of weeks of resurrection appearances – doubting Thomas gets his annual airing, and we hear of the risen Jesus appearing to the disciples while they're fishing in Galilee or walking the road to Emmaus – but then, for the remainder of the season of Easter, we're given long and rather convoluted Johannine discourses on the nature of Jesus' relationship with God, on believing and eternal life, on being and becoming one. What's this about?

Well, this year, I'm wondering if from the point of view of the lectionary compilers, the reason for this selection is that among the gospels, John seems the one written pre-eminently from a post-resurrection stance. It's often described as a mystical or unitive text – that is, it's written from the perspective of someone who is on the inside of the life of God, someone who knows a sense of 'oneness' with God, and it seeks to draw us into that same place and perspective. If this is right, we'll only really begin to make sense of the sayings of Jesus in this gospel, if we read them from the transformed perspective on God and human being that resurrection brings. So this year, I'm proposing that we too take a plunge! Rather than avoiding, as I've tended to, what seem to be a sequence of repetitive and abstruse texts, I'm hoping we can take the opportunity to unpack some of this gospel's key themes, and so discover what it might open up for us in this season of Easter.

The passage we just heard follows immediately from the well-known discourse of the Good Shepherd, which was the reading set for last week. It's here

that Jesus describes himself as the shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, the true shepherd who will not abandon his flock. By making use of this metaphor, John's Jesus powerfully evokes an identity between himself and God, who is characterised repeatedly in the Hebrew Bible as the shepherd of Israel. A raft of Scriptural allusions are in play here – from Psalm 23, 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want', to Psalm 97, 'For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand', to Ezekiel 34 which is considered the major backdrop of this gospel passage.¹

In Ezekiel's text, the leaders of Israel are described as false shepherds, as those who have fed on milk, dressed themselves in wool, and sacrificed the fattest sheep, and yet have failed to feed the flock. 'You have failed to make weak sheep strong', the prophet thunders, 'or to care for the sick ones, or bandage the injured ones. You have failed to bring back strays or look for the lost. On the contrary, you have ruled them cruelly and harshly. For lack of a shepherd they have been scattered, to become the prey of all the wild animals'. Because of this, says the Lord God, 'I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out ... I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them; he shall feed them and be their shepherd'.²

All of which suggests that when Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd, this is not some benign claim to excellence in pastoral care, but a highly charged theological matter. Little wonder that the Jews gather around him to ask, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly' (10: 24). But Jesus' response is hardly calculated to win friends and influence people. 'I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep'. And this brings us to two notions that are absolutely core to John's understanding of

¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), pp.628-630.

² Bruner, *The Gospel of John*, p.630.

Christ and of Christian discipleship – the notions of ‘works’ and ‘believing’. I’ll say a bit about each.

You might think that references to Jesus’ works or working would be evenly distributed throughout the Gospels, but it’s not so. Theologian W.H. Vanstone points out that Matthew writes once of the ‘works of Christ’, while Luke once refers to Jesus as ‘a prophet mighty in word and work’. ‘Otherwise neither the noun nor the verb is used in connection with Jesus in the first three Gospels’.³ Strikingly, however, ‘between the third and seventeenth chapters of John’s Gospel there are twenty-four occasions on which the words “work” or “working” refer to Jesus’. Vanstone says: ‘Quite explicitly and emphatically [then]... John presents Jesus as working, as intensely active, in the name of the Father and in obedience to His will’.

I’ll be drawing out the significance of this more fully in coming weeks, but for now I want to highlight the sense that for John there’s no distinction, no gap, between what Jesus does and what God is doing. Even in the short passage we just read, Jesus speaks several times of ‘the works I do in my Father’s name’, of doing ‘many good works from the Father’ and of ‘doing the works of the Father’. And likewise, there is no distinction or gap between what Jesus does and who he is. His critics want to separate what he has done from who he claims to be. When he asks them, ‘for which of the ‘many good works from the Father I have shown you are you going to stone me?’, they reply ‘it is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God’. But Jesus refuses this separation: the works themselves bear him witness, they testify to who he is. ‘if I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works’. Which leads to the radical conclusion: if there’s no gap between what Jesus does and what God does, and no gap between what Jesus does and who he is, then, anyone who truly ‘sees’ the works will also, as Jesus puts it, ‘know and understand

³ W.H. Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting*, (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2006), p.24.

that the Father is in me and I am in the Father'. For, as he says, 'the Father and I are one'.

An image that for me really helps crystallise how John understands the relation between Jesus and God is offered by icons of the Orthodox church. Many icons of the Transfiguration, for example, depict Jesus coming out of a dark blue background, which represents his life sourced in the mystery of God. It's as if he comes towards us out of the hinterland of the reality he names intimately and persistently as 'the Father' – and all he is and does is a manifestation of the Father. He is indeed the 'Word' made flesh, the invisible God become visible. All his 'works', everything he does, his healing of the blind and lame, his restoration of the outcast to community, his exposure of false religion ... all this is God working, a revelation of who and how God is. Or, as Jesus says elsewhere in this gospel, if you have seen me you have seen the Father (14: 9).

And yet, John emphasises again and again how hard it is for people to get it – how resistant those around him are to recognising, in Jesus, the very presence, the visibility of God. And this brings us to the emphasis on believing. Now, as we use the word, 'believing' often has connotations of something we do in our heads – a view we hold, something we think is true. But what John means by 'believing' is not just that. It's much more like 'trusting', or having confidence in. Just as the sheep have confidence in their shepherd and listen to his voice, so disciples are those who trust and are willing to entrust themselves to Jesus. And that's why Jesus suggests to those who aren't yet convinced they can trust him, 'even though you do not believe me, believe the works'. And this is how discipleship works in this gospel. If you can just begin to trust, if you're just willing to 'come and see', to listen to his voice, then you start to get to know him; the more you get to know him, the more fully entrusted you allow yourself to become. And that changes everything.

In a beautiful reflection on prayer, Jean Vanier wrote: 'Jesus always wants to penetrate more fully into our psyche, into our hearts and flesh. He wants to liberate

in us all our energies of love and wisdom; he wants to reside in us at the deepest level of our being, beyond all our fears and defense mechanisms. He wants to pray in us and to love the Father and others in and through us'.⁴ I think this is what John too is getting at. If we believe, that is, if we entrust ourselves to Jesus' presence and leading, we will find ourselves drawn by Jesus to the Father, joined in his relationship with God, a union of love. This is what 'liberates all our energies of love and wisdom', and makes us capable in our turn of performing the works of God.

John's Jesus comes from the Father and returns to the Father, he lives from unbroken oneness with the Father. All this can make us feel a bit on the outside of things, and John's gospel (which is written out of this perspective) can feel almost like a closed text, so whole, so one-d that we struggle to find a way in, a way to connect. But the whole point of Jesus coming among us, as he says, is so that 'where he is, there we may be also' (14: 3). Our access is believing – that is actively entrusting ourselves to him in listening, open-souled prayer – so as to find ourselves drawn to the inside of the life of God, on the inside of resurrection, recipients of eternal life who may never be snatched from the Father's hand.

⁴ Jean Vanier, 'What is Prayer?' <http://www.pallottinesisters.org/prayerlife/What%20is%20Prayer%20-%20Vanier.pdf> (accessed 10 May 2019).