



## Sermon

### ***Christ: the Divine Shepherd***

**John 10:22-30; Revelation 7:9-17**

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Last week, I said that the readings for this Easter season take us through insights of the eternal standing of Jesus from the heavenly perspective and on the other hand the growth of the early church. I addressed the question, "Who is Jesus?"

We considered the oft made claim that Jesus was a good teacher. You will remember that I took us to C.S. Lewis with his three possibilities that Jesus was mad, bad or God. His claims were so clearly that he was God, that he was a madman or else a conman but he was not good – unless of course those claims were indeed true.

We could think back to the reaction of Jesus' own family. Early in Jesus' public ministry the crowds started to follow him and he ministered with great authority healing diseases, driving out darkness, even subduing storms by a command. At this opposition developed:

When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind." <sup>22</sup> And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebub! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons."<sup>1</sup>

He must be insane or wicked – unless ....

The verses just before today's gospel reading take us to the same trilemma. Jesus had said:

The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life-- only to take it up again. No-one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father." At these words the Jews were again divided. Many of them said, "He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?" But others said, "These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?" <sup>2</sup>

Do you hear his claim? I have the authority to lay my life down and to take it up again. That is nonsense or crazy or -divine. His hearers got that: some said he is demon-possessed and mad (two categories combined) others said but look at the miracles he has done – are they by evil powers? Can a madman work miracles – even open the eyes of the blind?

Today's gospel is from the time of the Festival of Lights (also called Hanukah) which occurs in December. It commemorates the rededication of the Temple in 165BC after it had been desecrated by Greek invaders. They had tried to destroy Jewish religion and culture. The Jewish leadership capitulated but a revolt led by the Maccabee father and sons sought to restore pure religion, observation of the Torah and Jewish culture. We know that the Jewish readings set for that feast focussed on the failure of temple leadership during the Maccabean period. They used Ezekiel 34 which rebukes leaders who seek personal profit from the people as false shepherds who do not care for the sheep. It was with those readings in people's ears that Jesus spoke of himself as the good shepherd.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 3:21-22

<sup>2</sup> John 10:17-21

It was the year before the crucifixion. During the previous 2½ years of his ministry he has forgiven sins<sup>3</sup>, calmed stormy winds and waters<sup>4</sup>. He had spoken about the Torah<sup>5</sup> in a way no other rabbi would dare to basing his teaching on his personal authority not on precedent. To a first-century Jew, all of these things would have been understood as the actions of a person claiming to possess divine authority. He had healed the sick, the blind, the deaf, the lame and raised the dead – as the Messiah was prophesied to do.

Yet, he had not said openly that he was the expected Messiah. So they come and ask for a clear answer: “If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.”

We know he did not fit their idea of Messiah. He was not going to be the military hero who would drive the Romans out of Israel. Because of this misunderstanding, he could not announce his role to them in simple terms; his actions had to tell the story for him.

Jesus gave them the counterchallenge that the issue was not of ignorance but of will. He had given them the information they needed and the miracles he had worked were also proof enough. Therefore the problem was in their hearts and minds not in the evidence. He said they did not believe because they were not his sheep.

We need to understand that Middle-Eastern shepherding is not like sheep farming in New Zealand. There were and are no sheep dogs, no fences and flocks are small. The shepherd leads his sheep; he does not drive them. They learn his voice or some use a wind instrument to play a distinctive tune, and the sheep will follow. Here is a true example of sheep recognising their shepherd:

“During the Palestinian uprising in the late 1980s the Israeli army decided to punish a village near Bethlehem for not paying its taxes. The officer in command rounded up all of the village animals and placed them in a large barbed-wire pen. Later in the week he was approached by a woman who begged him to release her flock, arguing that since her husband was dead the animals were her only source of livelihood. He pointed to the pen containing hundreds of animals and quipped that it was impossible because he could not find her animals. She asked that if she could in fact separate them herself, would he be willing to let her take them? He agreed. A soldier opened the gate and the woman's son produced a small reed flute. He played a simple tune again and again—and soon sheep heads began popping up across the pen. The young boy continued his music and walked home, followed by his flock of twenty-five sheep.”<sup>6</sup>

Earlier Jesus emphasised that his sheep know his voice and they follow him; they won't follow a stranger. As we get to know him we learn to recognise his voice, his nature, his calling to us.

When I was looking for what turned out to be this position, we went for interview at a parish in the south of England. It looked ideal; it ticked all my boxes. Yet by the end of the day looking around the parish, both Helen and I knew the Lord was saying, “Not this one.” We didn't hear words, it was an inner knowledge but it was quite clear. Conversely, there have been times when someone has told me that God was saying something to them and I have thought, “But that is not how he is - the Lord would never say that.” As you get to know him, you learn to recognise his voice more clearly.

If the people who were interrogating Jesus had been of his flock they would have responded to him, to his voice, just the way a shepherd could call his sheep and they would come to him. But sheep of another flock would ignore that shepherd.

Jesus went on to say words which are so comforting to those who choose to follow him: “I know them; I give them eternal life and they shall never perish.”

Do you get them? Absorb it into your soul. As you have responded to Jesus, Jesus knows you. You are not distant or unknown to him. A friend told me on Monday that when Jesus said, “I am with you always even until the end of age.” It is literally translated, I am with you all the days [every day] until the end of the age. That gives such an immediacy to his presence – everyday, all the days. This day – he is with you. Tomorrow - he is with you ... Everyday - he is with you.

Are we left with fear of being robbed of that relationship? Jesus comments on that too, saying it is the Father who has given us to Jesus and no one can snatch us out of his hand. We are safe in the care of Jesus and in the hand of God the Father. As he continues he speaks of his unity with the Father. They work together to bring salvation, with one accord and one purpose. Indeed, their unity is more than a mere alliance; Jesus here claims they *are* one.

Wow! They asked if he were the Messiah (which in Jewish thinking was a royal human position) and they received a far greater answer! More than the Christ, he claimed to be equal with the Father, one with the God who is greater than all.

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<sup>3</sup> Matt. 9:2; Mark 2:5; Luke 5:20

<sup>4</sup> Luke 8:22 compare Ps 103:23-29

<sup>5</sup> Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5

<sup>6</sup> Burge G.M., 2000, *The NIV Application Commentary, John*, Zondervan Grand Rapids, Michigan, page 302

He said, "I and the Father, we are one." He does not mean just in this matter of protecting the believer. That is a matter of outward operation, he means one essentially. The Greek demonstrates this too, since the adjective "one" is neuter not masculine. Had he meant we are one person, he would have used the masculine adjective, but the neuter points to substance not personhood. The Father and the Son are two distinct persons but of one substance. But more of that on Trinity Sunday!

Last week we were given glimpse of the worship in heaven from John's Revelation. Today we have another and similar peek. Again there vast numbers of people and of angels worshipping around the throne. And we are told they say, "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." <sup>7</sup> And again, we are told that "...the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water." Here we have Jesus referred to with his title of the Lamb of God at the centre of the throne room of heaven, receiving worship from men and angels. He is declared to be the source of salvation – which only God can give. He is called the shepherd who leads his flock to springs of living water to eternal provision and the abundance of the Holy Spirit.

If we struggle with belief, we would do well to check ourselves – is it because we choose not to believe? It is quite clear to me that many avoid belief because if they were to believe in God they would be accountable and they will not accept that. Some are too content with superficial objections which allow them to avoid hard thinking and facing the challenges involved. But let us not fool ourselves - the real issue is in the will - not the mind.

Church, we can rest in the security of the Father's hand – knowing we are safe in him. We can join the worship of heaven as we honour the one who gave everything for us that he might lead us to his sheepfold and water us with his Spirit.

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<sup>7</sup> Rev 7:10