

4th Sunday of Easter, May 11th, 2025

10.30 Holy Communion, St Peter and St Paul, Langham

Acts 9.36-e, Revelation 7.9-e, John 10.22-30

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Reading today's gospel is a bit like beginning a story by reading the last chapter. It is an extract from near the end a long story that takes up the whole of chapters 9 and 10 of the gospel, and to understand what was happening we need to start with a brief resume of what went before. We read at the start of chapter 9 that Jesus was in Jerusalem for a festival, when he encountered a man who was blind from birth, He gave him his sight by rubbing mud made with his saliva into the man's eyes, before walking away. The day was a sabbath, when no work should be done, and those that John calls the Jews, his shorthand for the religious authorities as of course Jesus, John and all the disciples were Jews, took exception to this, and quizzed the healed man, and his parents, at length, trying to discredit what Jesus had done and labelling him a sinner for healing on the sabbath. They eventually threw the once blind man out of the temple, and made him an outcast – a nightmare for any believing Jew, to be cut off from his community and his God. The disciples following Jesus must have been afraid for themselves too, that following Jesus might lead to the same situation. This incident then leads into the passage in chapter 10 where Jesus sought out the blind man, and reassured him of god's love for him. He then turned on the religious authorities and referred to himself as the Good Shepherd, and as the gate to the sheepfold. But this was no calm teaching session on a Judean hillside – these sayings were delivered in a heated argument with his listeners. In calling himself the Good Shepherd who cared for his sheep, he was very pointedly referring to Old Testament prophecies that described the priests of that time as evil shepherds, who cared more for their own wealth and comfort than that of the flock. And in the way he said it "I am the Good shepherd", "I am the gate of the sheepfold" there was an echo of an echo of the Jewish name for God, the most holy name that couldn't be spoken, Yahweh, I am what I am. This was of course verging on the blasphemous in the minds of his listeners. And whilst his adversaries must have become increasingly enraged, both at how he was describing them and how he was describing himself, the words must have been of great comfort to the once blind man and to Jesus' followers – that he was, and always would be, the Good Shepherd who cared for his followers. And within it all, there was an enigmatic saying that at the time the disciples would not have understood.

And I lay down my life for the sheep.No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again.

Then in the words just before today's gospel we hear the effect of his words on his listeners.

Again the Jews were divided because of these words. Many of them were saying, 'He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?' Others were saying, 'These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?'

Then we come onto our reading. We are told the location and the time. The location was Solomon's portico – a covered cloister on the east of the Temple precincts. The time was the feast of the Dedication, Hannukah as we would call it now, that commemorated the rededication of the Temple after its desecration by foreign armies. If we take the year of the crucifixion to be AD33, which seems to be the current consensus, then from John's telling of events, the events we read about today happened sometime between December 2nd and December 8th in AD32. We have here no timeless myths, but events fixed in space and time. And John tells us that it was winter, which obviously from the date was true enough. But John always chooses his words carefully, and there is perhaps another implication – that it was not only a chilly, gloomy time as the winter solstice approached, but also a time of cold hearts, and spiritual darkness. Again Jesus was challenged about who he was by the religious authorities. Are you, or aren't you the Messiah? Jesus tells them that he has in effect already told them through the miracles and signs he has performed, but they have refused to listen. And then he takes up again the shepherd theme.

...you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand....

Again words that would probably have been a bit of a mystery at the time, although there was immediate reassurance there that the disciples were safe with Jesus. And then our reading ends with the astonishing words.

The Father and I are one.

Here Jesus made his claim to deity quite explicit. At this point some of those listening to him, attempted to stone him – the punishment for blasphemers – but Jesus and his disciples were able to evade them, and we read that they withdrew to the other side of the Jordan, where Jesus continued to teach the crowds. From there, the call came to come to his dying friend Lazarus, but that, as they say, is another story.

Over the centuries the Good Shepherd sayings of Jesus have been of immense comfort to his people – in times of distress and trial, they contain the promise that Jesus is always there, leading them, protecting them, seeking them out when they are lost, carrying them if necessary. A Good Shepherd who will never let us down. And that remains gloriously true today for us. In the very uncertain times in which we live we have great need of that reassurance. And perhaps in our individual lives, when we feel overwhelmed by circumstances and trauma of one sort or another, we need to know that Jesus the Good shepherd is walking close at hand. Paul's famous words in Romans come to my mind more and more frequently in these days of economic and political chaos, with the ethical and moral basis of our society seemingly falling apart.

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, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

But the reading tell us more than that. Firstly it tells us something about Jesus – not just an inspired teacher from 2000 years ago, but a human in which the Godhead dwelt. His claim that he is one with the Father is one that has occupied the finest theological minds over the centuries – what does this actually mean? How can God dwell in human form? The creeds, such as the Nicene creed that we will say shortly, were one of the outcomes of these theological endeavours, that try to formulate how Jesus and the Father are one, yet remain distinct. But ultimately it must remain a mystery, too large for human minds to comprehend. But despite its difficulty it is something we need to hold on to. In thinking about this mystery, C S Lewis famously wrote.

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

And as God, Jesus is able to give us more than comfort and protection in our day to day lives. His plan for us extends beyond the grave.

My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand....

Looking beyond our current existence is perhaps disturbing and scary, but the ultimate purpose of God in Jesus was to open the way to heaven for his people, through Jesus’ death on the cross, through his resurrection and to give us a hope that extends beyond the grave. In our reading from Revelation we have the words describing the vision of John of Patmos of the saints in heaven.

For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’

The Lamb at the centre of the throne, the risen, ascended Jesus enthroned as King in heaven, is still the shepherd of his people, caring for his people, forgiving them, bringing them through their earthly death to eternal life, and healing them from the scars and the injuries that have afflicted them in their earthly existence to make them whole. And for me at any rate, and I suspect for others here too, the closer we approach the end of our time in this place, the more important and significant these words become.

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