

John 10: 22-30

Revelation 7:9-end; Acts 9:36-end

Towards the end of John's Gospel, the author tells us about the primary reason why he has written his Gospel. He says this:

"...Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

He's emphasising three things here. First of all, the *identity* of Jesus – that he *is* the Messiah, foretold in the writings of the Old Testament and Jewish expectation, and even more than that, that he's the divine Son of God. Then secondly, that his identity as Messiah, the Son of God, demands a response from every individual. And thirdly, that a precious gift awaits all who put their trust/faith in him – the gift of eternal life. And these three emphases very much come to the fore in the discussion which forms our

reading this morning from chapter 10 of John's Gospel.

Now there is some significance in the fact that this conversation is set in the context of the Festival of the Dedication. It was a feast that had been quite recently established, because it commemorated events which had taken place relatively recently in the history of the people of Israel. In 167 BC, the Syrian emperor, Antiochus Epiphanes, tried to establish uniformity of worship throughout his empire. In doing so, he desecrated the temple in Jerusalem – the central place of worship for the Jewish people – by setting up an altar there to the god Zeus. In 164 BC, a heroic Jewish leader by the name of Judas Maccabaeus, led a successful revolt against the Syrians, and subsequently the temple was re-consecrated in an eight-day celebration.

So the annual festival commemorating this event became a joyful celebration of the restoration of freedom of worship in Jerusalem. The feast took place in December (hence John's note that it was

winter), and a particular feature of it was the use of *lights*, symbolising the restoration of the light of freedom.

Now you might be wondering why I'm mentioning all this historical stuff. Well, it's because of the fact that the conversation which takes place between Jesus and those gathered around him revolves around the question as to whether he *is* the long-expected Messiah. They ask him directly, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." The thing is, Jesus has been describing himself as a 'shepherd', and in the Old Testament, the image of a 'shepherd' is closely linked with the concept of a 'king' – after all, King David, the greatest of the kings of Israel, had been a shepherd. So those listening to him would no doubt have sensed that he was claiming to be the Messiah, the 'Anointed One' of God. The problem is, though, when we consider that Jesus was saying all this in the setting of a festival which commemorated a defeat of the occupying Syrians by an heroic Jewish military leader, the folk questioning Jesus would

have naturally been assuming that he was setting himself up as Messiah in *this* kind of mould – as a political and military leader. In fact, it was a popular expectation at the time that the Messiah would be a great political leader who would defeat the occupying Roman forces, re-establish the Israelite monarchy, and set himself up as King, reigning from Jerusalem. That's most likely why Jesus was reluctant to state categorically in public that he was the Messiah. So instead, the only thing he could do was to point them to two particular witnesses – his *works* and his *words*. Those questioning Jesus had seen his amazing *works* and heard his powerful *words*, yet they still chose to reject him. By contrast, in our reading from Acts, the news of Tabitha/Dorcas being raised to life through the ministry of the apostle Peter, spread throughout the city of Joppa, and as a result of this miraculous sign, *many* people put their faith in the Lord Jesus.

So, in today's Gospel reading, what we have here are two very different understandings of what it meant to *be* God's Messiah. On the one hand, there's the

popular understanding of a *political* Messiah who would usher in a new age for the Jewish people through the establishment of an *earthly* kingdom by a show of military power and might. In stark contrast to that is *Jesus' Messiahship*, foretold in the Old Testament Scriptures, which would involve the establishment of an *eternal* Kingdom, embracing people drawn from *all* nations and ethnicities. This is reflected in our reading from Revelation, with its vision of the saints and martyrs of God “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages”, standing before the throne of God and worshipping him.

The people gathered around Jesus in the temple who were hostile towards him, might have chosen to reject him as Messiah, thereby setting themselves up in opposition to God's purposes; as the Lord says about them, “you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep.” *But* they can't stop those who *are* coming to Jesus and following him – those who are *indeed* the sheep of his flock.

So, what *are* the supreme privileges of those who believe in Jesus - those who are the sheep of *his* pasture?

First of all, they are those who are *summoned* by Christ – *his* sheep hear *his* voice. Christ's call brings us into a new relationship with him – he *knows* each one of us personally. And it's a relationship which leads to a new *lifestyle*. If we claim to follow Jesus, then the proof of our faith in him is our *obedience* to him. We can't say that we have truly put our faith in the Lord Jesus if we continue to carry on living our lives the way *we* want to, rather than according to *his* way. Only the person who truly *obeys* truly *believes*.

Then secondly, those who put their faith in Jesus receive the gift of eternal life – “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.” Eternal life is not *only* about what happens to us when we die. It has even wider implications than that, because it's about the dawn of a new age when all wrongs will be righted, sins forgiven, and God will be all-in-all. So

those who follow Jesus are those who have found the narrow way that leads to the new life of the Kingdom of God. We are no longer part of this *passing* world under the power of the evil one, but we are part of what is *permanent / eternal*. We are already experiencing eternal life - life in all its fullness - life lived in relationship with God.

And thirdly, those who believe in Jesus are those who are *truly* secure – “No one will snatch them out of my hand”, the Lord promises. Again, in the vision of John from Revelation, the people of God are sheltered by the Lord; Christ, the Lamb of God, who saves his people through his sacrifice made once for all upon the Cross, is also the *shepherd* in whom they find their eternal safety and security. Those who are in *Christ* are protected for all *eternity*. Christ’s people are *his* possession. Even if *our* commitment to Jesus might waver around, *his* commitment to *us* is firm. The Father and the Son are *one* in this, in that the ‘flock’ is given to the Son by the Father, and the Father stands behind the Son in guarding the flock.

And those who stray from the fold will be brought back by Christ, the Good Shepherd.

All of these privileges we receive if we are members of Christ’s flock, and they are ours through the sovereign mercy and grace of God alone; they are *not* achieved through any efforts on our *own* part. What’s more, we can put our whole trust in Jesus because he is more than just another man. He is *one* with the living God. *His* action is the action of *God* working through him – he is by nature divine – the ‘Word-made-Flesh’. When we know Jesus, we know the Father.

So, this morning we’re reminded of the crucial importance of recognising who Jesus really *is*, and as a consequence of that, the need to respond to him in faith, commitment and obedience. Whatever we may consider *our* identity to be in *earthly* terms, let’s remember that above all else, our *primary* identity must be in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, who died, was raised to life, and sits enthroned

as Lord of all – to him be glory and praise for ever.
Amen.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, we give you thanks
that, through your mercy and grace, we are numbered among
your flock - people of your own possession. May we find our
safety and security in you alone. Amen.