

John 10.22-30
 Revelation 7.9-8.1
 11th May 2025

It was Winter

Introduction to the Theme

I love the small detail with which today's gospel reading begins: It was winter.

I think that describes the mood of John 10 which we'll hear read in just a moment. To say *it was winter* is not just to describe the season of the year but the atmosphere of the early church. It was a harsh time in which John was living as he writes this gospel and his readers, members of the emerging young first century Church, were struggling against the odds.

It felt like winter.

So John gives us an encounter between Jesus and his adversaries in the east wing of The Temple, in Solomon's Portico. Perhaps here, in sacred space dedicated to a King once revered as the wisest man who ever lived, truth would be re-discovered and encouragement given.

Not only was it winter, it was also Hanukkah, that festival of lights that was introduced in 164 BC as a dedication festival to commemorate the completion of the 2nd Temple.

So here, in the middle of winter, as the young church felt the chill of persecution and rejection, as they sought some respite from such a storm, (which came so soon after the spring time of resurrection) John takes us to Solomon's portico at Hanukkah, perhaps in the hope that some words of truth from Jesus and rays of light from The Spirit will breath fresh hope into a struggling community.

In the middle of winter he talks of a faithful Shepherd. A picture that, he hopes, will bring this fledgling church fresh hope and new courage.

All of us feel it's like *winter* from time to time. Even in these days of spring we might be carrying heavy personal burdens. We all need a moment in Solomon's Portico now and then. A moment to be reminded of hope and a Good Shepherd's care. And such encouragement is at the centre of today's gospel reading.

The Sermon

In 2015 James Rebanks published *'The Shepherd's Life: A Lake District Tale'*. In it he reflects on his family's life tending Herdwick sheep – a breed brought over to Cumbria by boat a thousand years ago by the Vikings. Beatrix Potter left 15 of her farms, thus helping to create the National Trust, partly so that these mountain hardy sheep, the Herdwicks, could be maintained.

It's sobering to realise that today they sell at market just for a quarter of the price they would have made in 1970. It's obviously a tough time to be Fell Farming Herdwicks in Cumbria these days.

A townie like me looks out on a field of sheep and thinks of it as a pastoral idyll. Yet I suspect in Jesus' day and on James Rebanks' farm in Matteredale it's anything but.

One of the things that fascinated me as I read up on Herdwick sheep is the fact that they are 'hefted', meaning they hold to a place on the Cumbrian fells with no fences needed. They have a sense of belonging to one specific place, and that's drilled into them by their mothers in the first summer following their birth. They know where they are safe and where they belong. I rather like that!

There is a similar thought running through John 10, part of today's lectionary reading. This is the chapter that speaks of Jesus the Good Shepherd protecting his sheep, of a sheep fold where there is security and specifically that mutuality promised by Jesus in verses 27 and 28 when he says *My own sheep listen to my voice, I know them and they follow me....no one will snatch them from my care.*

So, actually what we have here isn't a rustic scene that is tranquil but the picture of a vulnerable flock which could so easily be destroyed. It's really a picture of the emerging Church in John's day. They are struggling.

Just think about how tough it was to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus at this time. As part of the Church you will have come to the conclusion that Jesus is God's promised one, yet many of the people you grew up with in your faith tradition will reject you because they don't see how Messiahship and Jesus go together. But it doesn't stop there.

The occupying power, who maybe you hoped would protect your religious freedoms only goes so far in offering security because you also, in the Church, call Jesus the Son of God, and that's a title the Romans reserved exclusively for the emperor. You've misused that designation and therefore forfeited the protection of Rome in the process.

So, quite early on the Church became a minority group with not many friends.

So, maybe John is writing here in chapter 10 to offer encouragement to this vulnerable emerging Church. You might be a minority, this is actually a fierce pastoral scene, a flock at risk, but God says: *No one will snatch you from my care.*

A recent report from the Foreign Office on religious liberty surprised me as I read its findings. It says that taking the whole international picture into account Christians are the most persecuted religious grouping at the present time, especially in the Middle East. In Iraq, for example, in 2003 there were 1.5million Christians, today that has reduced to just 120,000. Christians have simply fled the country because of intimidation and persecution.

Being a minority isn't easy whether that's because of your faith, your sexuality or your race. And today's passage says God's love, God's inclusion and God's tolerance is greater than that community's enemies.

Our Baptist and United Reformed Church traditions grew out of the intolerance we were shown, ironically by other Christians! Part of our history, now thank God firmly in the past, was that ministers like me were forced to leave Parish Churches and their livings after the Act of Uniformity passed in 1662. So, the Free Church tradition has long been an advocate of religious, personal and civic freedom – it's one reason why Amnesty International had its inaugural meeting in the Council Chamber of Baptist House in London.

So, in the middle of winter John speaks to his readers of a faithful Shepherd, he also encourages them with the image of a Christ-like God.

There in Solomon's Portico Jesus faces a barrage of questions about his identity. Those asking the questions felt as if he was teasing them with a certain ambiguity, they describe themselves as being 'in suspense'. Tell us plainly, they say, are you the Messiah?

Later, in Holy Week, in Pilate's House he was asked a similar question.

Jesus seems to view his interrogators as wayward sheep who refuse him as the Good Shepherd and so, instead of engaging them in long discussions, as he did with presumably more open minded enquirers such as Nicodemus or the Woman at the Well, he points them to his actions. These, he says, are his credentials.

And then, interestingly, he goes on to say: *My own sheep listen to my voice.* It's as if, as we see Jesus reach out in love and accept those on the margins of his society that the majority ignored, we hear God speaking to us. As we learn the story of a compassionate Christ who saw a hungry crowd of 5,000 and fed them, who became aware of the embarrassment of a bride and groom who hadn't catered for enough wine to serve their guests and so then saved the day for them, as he makes time for children after an exhausting day out and about amongst the crowds – as we see his deeds and witness his credentials – we too hear God's voice speaking to us.

Isn't that what verse 30 is all about?: *The Father and I are one*. Isn't that about the Christ-like God. For we may regularly ask: what is God like? And the message of the gospels is: Jesus is like God. Jesus shows us God. Jesus lived with God's love, God's light, God's ways.

I suspect we still hear the voice of the Good Shepherd speaking to us in every act of kindness, every attempt at reconciliation, and every quest for justice and peace that comes our way today. We hear God's whisper in acts of compassion; we see God's character in the loving faithfulness of a fellow human being. That's how, today in the hustle and bustle of life, we still hear the voice of the Shepherd calling us, leading us and showing us the way.

On a winter's day John encourages his readers with this picture of a Christ-like God.

In today's first reading from Revelation, we come across those who have also suffered in this life, who have endured struggle and persecution but who are now part of the worshipping community of heaven.

We invest so much that is good and deeply meaningful to us in our concept of heaven. Heaven represents not only the best but the most authentic ideals we might have about existence.

On this, the first day of Christian Aid Week 2025, we might do well to think again of perhaps their most memorable strapline: *We believe in life before death*.

And, I think John, writing his gospel at a time when many were finding living the faith was tough, I think he was saying as he talks about life eternal that it truly has to start now, and so he commends them to be encouraged and be courageous. Those ideals you hold and one day hope to experience in all their fulness in heaven, let them sustain you in your life now, let the character of God, the community of the Trinity and the beating heart of love that is at the very centre of the universe, let them be your inspiration today, however tough today may be for you, live with that touch of heaven blessing you today.

It was the season of winter, and to his first readers it may well have felt like winter in their faith pilgrimage, be encouraged writes John as he reflects on this moment from Solomon's Portico, be inspired by the faithfulness of the Good Shepherd, the character of the Christ-like God and the authenticity of life that is eternal.

So, may these lessons from a Jerusalem winter continue to inspire us in the closing weeks of an English spring in the name of God, who offers us all *life before death*. Amen.