

Sermon 12 May 2019

John 10:22-30

I see two issues being raised by Jesus in this short gospel passage, the issues of faith and of his call to us. But first, let us look at the context in which Jesus is speaking.

Jesus is in Jerusalem at the time of the Festival of Dedication, also known as Hanukkah. It commemorates the rededication during the second century BC of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, when according to legend Jews had risen up against their Greek-Syrian oppressors in what was known as the Maccabean Revolt. Against all odds, a small band of faithful but poorly armed Jews, led by Judah the Maccabee, defeated one of the mightiest armies on earth, drove the Greeks from the land and reclaimed the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

So Jesus is walking through the Temple and the Jewish leaders put this question to him, 'Please tell us, straight up, are you the Messiah?' Jesus replies that he has already told them and has also shown them through what he has done in the name of his Father, but they still fail to understand, they still refuse to believe. So here we have the first issue, that of faith. Faith is a wonderful thing. Knowledge is also a wonderful thing but it is very different to faith. Knowledge is understanding something that can be proved. Faith is having confidence in something that cannot be proved. I have faith that our new church will be built next year. I cannot prove it, but I believe it will be. Some of you who have been waiting for over ten years for this to happen might not share my faith!

However, I can point to certain factors which would indicate some justification for that faith – advanced plans etc. In the same way, Jesus points to those things he has done in the name of God. He is referring to his miracles, his teaching. But still the Jewish leaders don't believe him. They need even more tangible proof. I don't altogether blame them. Asking them to come to terms with the fact the Messiah, a figure featuring prominently in their history, is now in their midst is a big call.

And remember the Resurrection has yet to happen at this stage. It is so much easier for us having had the chance to learn about not only the life of Jesus here on earth, but also what happened after he died on the cross, to believe. And yet, even then, those that believe are today very much in the minority. Faith is not an easy thing, but then I ask myself, Is it faith itself that is difficult, or is it actually putting it into practice? Because I really do believe that deep down the vast majority of people do believe; it's just that they are not too sure what they believe in. I believe the thousands of people turning out for prayer across the country following the Christchurch massacre illustrates this.

It takes courage to put up your hand as a believer. It takes courage to put your belief into practice. It takes courage to make sacrifices in support of your belief.

I am reminded of the well-known story of Blondin, the famous French tightrope walker. In 1894, Blondin strung a tightrope across the Niagra falls and, before thousands of cheering people, inched his way from the Canadian side to the United States side of the falls. When he arrived safely, the crowd cheered him. They yelled his name over and over again, 'Blondin! Blondin!'

Blondin shouted back at the crowd, 'I am Blondin. Do you believe in me?'

The crowd shouted back, 'We believe! We believe!' Blondin then asked them, 'Do you believe that I can go back across the falls on that tightrope carrying someone on my shoulders?'

Again, the crowd shouted, 'We believe! We believe!' Blondin then asked, 'Who will that person be?'

There was dead silence. Then after an uncomfortable minute or two, a man stepped forward. He climbed on Blondin's shoulders and Blondin carried him, albeit a little precariously, back to the other side of the falls.

Are we like the crowd or like that one man? Saying we believe is one thing, actually putting it into practice is another. That's a question I will leave with you to ponder.

The second issue Jesus raises is his call to us. '*My sheep recognise my voice; I know them, and they follow me.*' Verse 27. A couple of points to take on board here. First, this exchange takes place very soon after Jesus gives us the parable of the Good Shepherd. So this image of us as his flock and Jesus caring for us is fresh in the minds of his listeners.

Jesus goes on to say that those who recognise his voice and follow him will be taken care of by him. '*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them away from me.*' In other words, if we follow him, if we believe in him, he will care for us as a shepherd cares for his sheep. You might say, our future is in safe hands.

However, I do believe there is a bit more to it than just an assurance of a safe future. There is also an element of his call to us and us answering that call. Hence the reference to recognising his voice and following him. Interestingly, this particular Sunday is often referred to as Vocations Sunday. What is a 'vocation?'

A vocation is an occupation to which a person feels called to and for which they feel suitable.

What is also interesting is that the term has its origins in Christianity. The word *vocation* comes from the Latin *vocatio*, which literally refers to God's calling.

So before you get a little confused with all these connections and references, let's join the dots together, let's sum up. Using the analogy of a shepherd, Jesus calls us to follow him, and if we answer that call, he promises that he will care for and protect us, he will always be there for us. The point is this, that promise is predicated on us believing in him and being, as faithfully as we can, committed disciples of his. I want to illustrate this with a story I shared with you almost two years ago, but it demonstrates our point so well that I just have to use it again.

A monk was kneeling alone in his cold, bare cell, praying most fervently. As the noon hour approached, the cell was suddenly filled with a bright glow. Lifting his eyes, the monk had a vision. It seemed to him that he saw Christ walking through village streets and fields, healing the sick, blessing little children, and preaching the word of God to the crowds. The monk gazed at the vision with awe, feeling so very blessed that the good Lord should show himself to his humble servant in this way. But suddenly his joy was interrupted by a familiar sound. The chapel bell began to clang loudly, calling him to leave his cell and do his daily work. For now it was the time when the sick and the poor gathered outside the monastery gates. There they received a daily portion of bread, which the good brothers baked especially for the needy. And it was this monk's duty each afternoon to distribute the bread.

The monk was filled with sorrow and doubt. What should he do? How could he turn his back on this magnificent vision? How could he desert this vision for a crowd of beggars outside the gate? Surely they could wait. But the thought of the poor people waiting at the gates would not leave the monk's mind. A battle was taking place within his soul between the ecstasy of the vision before him and deep distress for the people who waited outside.

As he struggled with what to do, he seemed to hear a voice whisper deep within himself, 'Do thy duty, and leave the rest to God.'

At once he knew what he must do. Rising from his knees and taking one last look at the vision, he left his cell and hurried out to feed the poor. There were so many to feed and the monk thought he would never finish. He was desperate to return to his cell, so hoping that the radiant vision might still be there.

At last, after a long hour, his work was done. He hurried down the long corridor to his room, threw open the door and stopped on the threshold with an awestruck gasp. The vision was still there. He sank to his knees with joy and as he did so, the vision spoke, 'If you had stayed, I would have left.'

The monk knew he had made the right decision when he had left to help his needy brothers and sisters.

We practise our faith through what we do for others. If and when we do that, Christ promises that he will be there for us, always.

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