

*Among the wolves that's for sure*

*Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's Colonnade. The Jews gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly". Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one."*

*Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?" "We are not stoning you for any of these", replied the Jews, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God." Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are gods'? If he called them gods', to whom the word of God came – and the Scripture cannot be broken – what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, 'I am God's Son'? Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father." Again they tried to seize him, but he escaped their grasp. (John 10:22-39)*

We do not like hostility or tension in the church. Well, I know I don't. Members, congregations, churches, synods fighting or squabbling is just not nice to be around and there is often a fervour about such things as people claim to be representing the truth and therefore those who against them are, by definition and existence, not representing truth. 'God is on my side!' is the issue and the ultimate trump card in the fight for truth. Pilate asked, 'What is truth?' and you can find answers most definitely in religious fights!

Today we observe in the Easter season Good Shepherd Sunday and each year this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter will have readings about shepherds – bad ones, good ones, and of course, The Good Shepherd. Our Gospel for today is Jesus' words about his identity. In answering the question put to him by a hostile crowd "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly" he picks up the shepherd image by saying to them that they are not his sheep because they do not listen to him – and they keep not listening to him – for his sheep listen to him, follow him, and he gives them eternal life. Jesus then answers their question clearly in Jewish terms and says that his Father has given the sheep to him, he does his miracles in the Father's name, and thus he and the Father are one.

Last year we heard that Jesus is the Good Shepherd who dies for the sheep (John 10:11-18). The year before we heard that Jesus is the door for the sheep so that the sheep may live, and live an abundant life (John 10:1-10). And now this year we hear that Jesus the shepherd and God who is Israel's Shepherd ('the Lord is my shepherd' says King David) are one. Sheep, shepherd, pastoral scene, care, cute little lambs are running around in the imagination – it's really, even for sophisticated city people – a recipe for 'aahhh' – for comfort, help, and support. Jesus is wonderful we would say.

But what do we see? What do we read before this chapter and what do we read in the little connecting verses between each year's readings and what do we hear at the conclusion of today's gospel – which is not formally part of the reading for today? That this entire scene – all these messages – comes out of and is part of an ongoing fight, squabble, tension over religion!

Jesus calls himself the door of the sheep because he says that the religious leaders are blind and guilty and can only lead people to darkness, blindness, and death. Prior to that they were fighting over whose father each had and both claiming the other had the devilish parentage. Now what happens after Jesus talks about his father? The Jews pick up stones and go to stone him! So you'd think Jesus

might have learned that the Jews are pretty sensitive here – got away with it once we might say – but why look for trouble? What do they do this time the shepherd links himself to the ‘Lord is my shepherd’ where he and the Father are one? The Jews picked up stones to stone him!

But Jesus keeps going – he asks the questions now ‘Why are you doing this?’. The irony is that their zealotry for God dishonours God as they attack God’s Son and they don’t see it. They don’t even ‘read’ correctly the miracles they see him perform. Even this argument ends with the Jews trying to seize Jesus but he escaped.

Of course he doesn’t escape for ever; they do capture him, although John paints the scene as Jesus allowing himself to be captured, and they don’t stone him, because they want something to attack this claim of Jesus’ that he and the Father are one. His words caused his death by crucifixion for they wanted Jesus to be cursed by God – the ultimate big gun is used in the fight. Take that! Hah! You’re dead!

Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed!)

If you want to use fighting or conflict imagery – it is Jesus who is the ultimate big gun. If you want to use the pastoral world – then this shepherd can take on any foe and win – he can speak and nothing – not even death – can silence him – and he knows his sheep and he makes it possible for his sheep to follow him. Go up against Jesus and you lose. Follow him and you win.

And the world still laughs at this message; our sinful self chaffs under this news and wants to break out of following Jesus and sneers that he is a delusion and we must forge life for ourselves; the demonic whisper and seduce people away from Jesus’ word – anything to stop the voice being heard; and death attempts to bully us into fear and doubt over Jesus – Jesus doesn’t know you, you will die alone and forgotten.

Listen to the conversations around our society – maybe in our families or in the workplace and down the pub and there is often a clear message evident – Jesus is useless, God and religion are dangerous or irrelevant, no body helps us in our suffering, or paradoxically all the bad things that happen are often laid at God’s feet – you [God] did this [tragedy]! To enter a religious conversation these days can be like entering a minefield. (And I’m not really going to talk about the inter Christian squabbling that can go on except to say that ultimately our stance / stand / position as Christians must be on an exegetical study of all of God’s Word and not about either our few favourite bible texts or our own personal views dressed up with a smattering of Scripture. When the basis for your teaching and confession is God’s Word then a lot of the heat can dissipate because all sides can focus on God’s Word and what the shepherd is actually saying.)

Christianity today is marketed as family friendly, good morality, and being socially aware. There is often little mention that to be a Christian is to enter the world of tension and fighting – against sin, against injustice, against untruth/lies/distortions – that the sheep are under attack. Now perhaps that’s not a strong selling point – but if Jesus seemed to lurch from fight to squabble to misunderstanding to hostility and we follow him in the same world, what makes us think it should be any different?

When you acknowledge that Jesus is your Lord – your God – then all the other tin pot gods of this planet – our sinful self included – scream in rage. Jesus comes to people and brings them into his kingdom by binding up the strong man who used to have power – his voice is life for us for he continually forgives us and gives us new starts – his body and blood are our food to strengthen our faith – our trust in his words alone; to heal our bodies; and person-to-person forgive our sins.

He is our shepherd – he is the Christ, the Messiah, and more than that, he is our Lord who knows us. God will never let the fights and tensions of this world snatch us out of his hands. And in this truth we live!