



SERMONS

by

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Bible readings: Acts 9:36-43 and John 10:22-30

Key aim: 1) Exploring how to develop discipleship

2) Exploring to be a good sheep

Title: “Shepherd and the Sheep”

The Gospel Narrative

“It was winter,” John tells us in the Gospel reading. How do you feel in the winter? I personally suffer from cold hands, especially worse in the winter. When I shake people’s hand that’s the first thing they normally tell me, followed by the saying ‘cold hands, warm heart’.

But what is John really articulating?

We’re all most likely to have experienced winters and if we are not careful we will hear John’s statement as just a statement about the time of the year. John said: It was winter, and the Festival of the Dedication of the Temple was being celebrated in Jerusalem. I believe John is not simply describing a season of the year. He is describing a season of our faith. The Feast of Dedication, known today as Hanukkah, had its origin in the liberation and rededication of Jerusalem and the temple under the Maccabean’s in about 165 BC, after it had been desecrated by the King at the time. This King sacrificed pigs on the temple altar. Hanukkah celebrates the day that Israel regained control of the temple and rededicated it to the one true God. The Bible teaches us that year after year they gathered and celebrated that day the temple was rededicated to God.

But did the celebrations, bring about any changes in their lives?

The truth is the Israelites failed to give themselves back to God. They stagnated in faith. In verse 25-26 the crowd hardened hearts cannot hear Jesus’ words or recognize who he is (Jesus answered, “I have already told you, but you would not believe me. The deeds I do by my Father’s authority speak on my behalf; but you will not believe, for you are not my sheep).

They failed to experience the eternal life of God in the here and now - in the commandment to love God and each other.

How relevant is this problem today?

And in many ways we can see the same thing happening today. Far too often we set aside and give the exterior temples of our lives to God but keep our hearts for ourselves. So the Bible becomes meaningless and fanciful rather than a path to open our hearts to God. We build walls with our neighbours instead of building bridges and becoming true neighbours of Christ through love.

For John, Jesus’ humanity meant essentially that he had a twofold mission: Firstly, as the “Lamb of God” – who purchased the redemption of humankind by dying on the cross. What I mean by this is that he displayed His love for humankind, he died for what he believed in so that our sins can be washed away and everyone who believes can be given a second chance by having Jesus as a leader, or we might say shepherd who helps us to lay down our burdens as we follow Him – the key is in following Him.

Secondly, through His life and ministry Jesus revealed the love of God and we too can reveal the love of God through our actions by focusing on key aspects of our faith – our Christian values –

compassion, empathy, sympathy, passion towards one another – to help change how we see, hear, know, believe, and live. As long as we fail to grasp this in our life and heart, Jesus will always say to us, "You do not believe because you are not of my sheep." Listen very carefully to what Jesus says. He does not say, "You are not my sheep because you do not believe." It's the other way around: "You do not believe because you are not of my sheep." Therefore John is suggesting in verse 26 that something very deep and personal must happen in our hearts or lives which causes us - compels us even - to follow the Shepherd by giving ourselves willingly and joyfully in His service.

Church, there is more to being a sheep than the human act of believing. It comes with action rather than just words.

From the standpoint of eternity there are really only two kinds of people: the sheep of Jesus, and those who are not his sheep. I believe John is calling on us as Christians to live out our faith by following Jesus as sheep would follow a good shepherd, and for the shepherds of the church community to set good examples to the sheep. **Can we be a sheep for Jesus? We need to be a purposeful church. Are we prepared to live out our belief by following the shepherd?**

What gifts do you have and when was the last time you made yourself a sheep? Let me draw your attention to the book of Acts 9:36-43 which we heard read earlier. Luke tells us "In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor." (Acts 9:36). You could say a true sheep based on her deeds. Tabitha's reputation was made from something as simple as sewing clothing for the poor. It appears this was her one talent. She is one of a few women called a disciple. The word 'disciple' means a learner, a follower, and that became her motivation in sewing clothes. It was out of gratitude for Jesus that she dedicated her one gift to Jesus and did it to the best of her ability. **Can you do that for Jesus?**

You might never have considered sewing as important a gift as say teaching or prophecy, but the fact is she is the one called a disciple. This is the reason I am sure Tabitha was "always doing good and helping the poor". Because she was following the example of Jesus, helping those in her community in need. **What are you good at? What do you enjoy doing? What are you passionate about? Are you channelling that gifting or passion for Jesus? What are you doing for Jesus?**

It can be as simple as sewing or baking. Let me tell you something church, the highest calling in Christian ministry is to care in practical ways for the most vulnerable in society. It's one of the main reasons I remained a Methodist when I moved to this country from Ghana even though my immediate family are all Roman Catholic– in recognition of Methodist long-standing roots with social action.

I recently read an article by Bishop Stephen from Church of England on premier website - encouraging churches to support local authorities and other agencies by giving financially and offering use of their premises. I was struck by his statement stating that, *"This is not the church saying 'look at us being charitable', but the people of God letting their deeds speak for Him"*.

In a recent documentary that I watched on BBC called *The Battle for Christianity*, Archbishop Welby said: "The Church is neither right nor left. It identifies with the Kingdom of God, which is both right

and left in different ways and doesn't really fit on a political spectrum." He said the Church at its best is in "constant engagement" with society. I believe when he talked about constant engagement with society he was advocating social action projects like the one Bishop Stephen mentioned. **When was the last time you engaged with your society?**

I am pleased to mention that our circuit has a social action project called Akwaaba in partnership with Hackney Migrant Centre - A Sunday social drop-in for asylum seekers, refugees and other migrants. It seeks to create a secure and risk free environment for refugees and asylum seekers to socialise and feel welcome in Hackney. I believe they can do with a helping hand from other churches in our circuit. There are many ways you can contribute to the work of God. The Chatsworth Road Lunch club is another way you could get involved.

I know that Sarah is working with you here in this church to help you think about how you can develop some mission and outreach directly associated with this place. It doesn't matter how small it is.

I'm using my gift to preach to you this morning. I also use my gift to represent my church at conference, Synod, church council and circuit council level. **How are you representing your church?** You may be good with singing or kids or welcoming people. People don't care how much someone says they are a Christian. What registers with them is when they show that belief through action. If we want to influence people for Christ, as Tabitha clearly did, then we must use our gifts to serve them, willingly and joyfully. Many of the widows of Joppa were walking around in clothes made by Tabitha. She became a person of importance in the church because she found fulfilment in, and focussed her service in doing what she was good at. She realised her potential. The legacy of Tabitha wasn't just sewing for Jesus. Through her deeds, the faith community experienced the manifested love of God in a very practical way. The fact that right after her death, there is an urgent plea to Peter ("Please hurry and come to us."), speaks of the integral role God had given her in meeting the needs of her community. **What will your legacy be? What is your gift?**

We will each have different gifts, but there is one gift which God has given to us all if only we would allow it to flourish. **Any idea what that gift is?** Peter displayed it here. I believe the greatest gift is availability. If we don't make ourselves available to God, no matter what other kinds of gift we have, it is of no value. Gift without availability is a liability to God. **What does availability mean?** It means putting ourselves completely at God's disposal for Him to do anything and everything He wants to do in us, through us, with us, for us, at any given time. In this story Peter was available, and God used him mightily. **What gifts has the Lord entrusted to you? What is He calling you to do with them?**

A little later after this encounter, Peter wrote a letter in 1 Peter 4:10 to the Church stating: "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms." In this way we express our belief in the risen Christ, in the extent to which we demonstrate the qualities of a sheep, and use the gifts we have been given to serve others as Christ served. May God inspire you to be a good sheep or shepherd to your community. **Amen**

Experience/references

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