

65th Anniversary of St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth 21
November 2021
John 10:1-10,22-30
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. Let's pray:

Today's sermon is based on the gospel lessons read from John 10 moments ago. I'll treat them in order of the last first and the first last.

In verse 22, John tells us, "It was winter."

Complaint! This wretched winter is the worst I've experienced in 11 years of living in Adelaide. Drab grey skies that dull the senses, obscure the bright blue sky, and repel warm sunshine. Wind that chills my bones. Cold that robs me of my love of swimming in the sea and enjoying an ice-cold beer. And jacarandas only flowering in the latter part of November? It's about as much as this Queenslander can bear. Whinge over!

We all know what winter is but John's report implies more than a statement about the time of year and simply describing a season. He's hinting at a season of life, a season of our faith. John's giving us a diagnosis of the internal condition, the faith of those who've gathered for the Feast of Dedication.

The Feast of Dedication, more commonly known as Hanukkah, celebrates the liberation of Jerusalem and the temple from the Syrian king, Antiochus. Antiochus had desecrated the temple by building an altar to Zeus and sacrificing pigs on the temple altar. Hanukkah celebrates the day that Israel regained control of the temple and reconsecrated it to the one true God, the God of Israel.

For nearly two hundred years they'd gathered. Year after year they gathered to remember and celebrate the day the temple was reconsecrated to God. The problem is that they failed to give themselves back to God. They're frozen in the past. Their hardened hearts can't hear Jesus' words, understand his works, or recognise who he is. They fail to experience the eternal life of God in

the here and now – in the changing of water into wine, in the feeding of the 5000, in the healing of the lame and sick, in the raising of Lazarus, in the commandment to love God, each other, and themselves.

This isn't only a Jewish problem. It's our problem too. We often consecrate, or set aside, the exterior temples of our lives to God but keep our hearts for ourselves. The risk we run in celebrating an anniversary like this, is the temptation to look back and focus on personal achievements rather than being constantly enthralled and inspired by God's continuing work in our lives and community. Doctrine can become a means of exclusion rather than a path to God, Scripture a weapon rather than the revelation of God's life with God's people, neighbours as enemies to be feared and destroyed instead of enemies becoming neighbours through love. Life becomes ritual instead of sacramental.

And why not? It's always safer and more comfortable to consecrate the external parts of our lives than it is to risk consecrating our hearts to God. Because consecrating our heart, the seat of our soul, will change how we see, hear, know, believe, and live, in ways that are uncomfortable to say the least.

And yet, for as long as we fail to consecrate ourselves, our life, our heart, all that we are and all that we have, we will stand here saying, "Tell us plainly, are you the Messiah or are you just another foreigner that needs to be thrown out of our temple?"

Jesus' response is always the same. "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

Jesus doesn't exclude anyone. We do that to ourselves. If we don't belong it's only because we don't hear as evidenced by the request, "Tell us plainly."

"Tell us plainly" are the words of a frozen people with winter in their hearts, frozen in the past. It's the worst winter we can experience. "Tell us plainly" reveals that our faith has been lulled into a comfortable sleep. That's a risky place to be. If anything, the faith to which Jesus calls us should make us uncomfortable:

Blessed are the poor, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Listen to Jesus' words: love God, your neighbour, your enemies; don't worry about your life or tomorrow; turn the other cheek; don't judge; sell your possessions and give to the poor; take up your cross; show mercy like the Good Samaritan; forgive seventy times seven; wash each other's feet; follow me to the cross.

If that doesn't make us squirm just a bit, feel a little uneasy, re-examine our lives and priorities, then perhaps the temperature is starting to drop. The uncomfortable faith to which Jesus calls us is nothing less than God's own life, right here, right now, in this world, in your life and in my life. It's a quality of life that never perishes.

But I know we aren't people frozen in the past, here at St Peter's. The temperature isn't dropping. The focused attentiveness to our Shepherd's voice; the uncomfortable faith responses to those in dire need; the resilience we've shown when challenged as we have been over the last 18 months, is extraordinary and brings glory to God. If people want to see Jesus, they need only walk into this building where strangers are welcomed, listened to and fed; listen in to any of our Bible study groups; wander into our welfare shed. May the Holy Spirit continue to guide and teach us, the Father to hold us tightly, and Jesus to lead us for another 65 years and beyond.

The second thing I want to address is the gate metaphor Jesus uses at the beginning of chapter 10. Gates open and close. Gates keep sheep in, and wolves out. Gates close to death and open to life. Jesus is the gate that encloses and protects. And he's the gate that opens to pastures of abundance. "I came," he says, "that they may have life, and have it abundantly." I'm drawn to the gate metaphor because it fits with what's happening in our country, our state, our city, your life and my life. Reopening.

When will we reopen? What will it take? How will we do it? What will happen when we do?

Questions about reopening have been on everyone's mind at some level but more so in the last week or two. Indeed, our celebration today has been directly impacted by such concerns. Reopening is in the news every day. Our prime minister, premiers, and mayors are talking about and planning for it. People are protesting both for and against reopening. Medical experts are offering cautions and guidance about when and how reopening should happen. Business owners are trying to make plans. For some the answer is clear, for others it's not. Taken together, they don't tell us whether the gate should be opened or closed.

Whose voice do you listen to and trust about reopening? Political leaders? Medical experts? The press? Social media? Whose lead do you follow? And how does the Jesus Gate fit into all of this?

My concern is that if we reopen the world around us before we reopen the life within us, we'll find ourselves more closed off than we have been during the last 18 months. I worry we'll choose an economic life over an abundant life. And "what will it profit [us] if we gain the whole world but forfeit [our] life?" (Matthew 16:26)

So, when I speak about reopening, I'm talking about reopening our eyes, hearts, and lives. I'm talking about reopening ourselves to something new, something different, something unexpected. I'm talking about reopening to life, and life abundant, not just for ourselves but for everyone; especially in the Playford community.

The abundant life isn't about quantity, wealth, success, approval, popularity, security, being number one, or any of the other things we often think it is. How many times have you got what you wanted, been what others said you should be, or done what was encouraged and rewarded by society only to discover your own emptiness and poverty? You may have had it all but you lacked abundance.

The abundant life is a quality of life, not a quantity of stuff. It's about faith, hope, and love. It's about goodness and mercy. It's more about compounding value than it is about compounding interest.

The abundant life enhances our lives and the lives of others. It refuses to add to the pain of the world. It's about love, joy, hope, courage, kindness, generosity, beauty, forgiveness, dignity, gratitude.

What if we listen and let the Shepherd's voice guide our reopening? I think it might change us, our relationships, our community and world for the better.

I'd like to leave you with a lovely image that I'm sure Brenton Chomel won't mind me sharing. Brenton once showed me an image inspired by this text. Please close your eyes (if they're not already), and picture this scene... St Peter's Anglican cathedral rising majestically above the northern bank of the Torrens River, standing sentinel over verdant paddocks filled with sheep grazing peacefully and contentedly. The glow of soft and misty light imparting an ethereal sense of calm. The whole scene exuding the serenity of creation wooed into existence by the voice of Love...

That Good Shepherd, who leads, guides, and calls each of us by name; that Shepherd who opens and closes gates – that Shepherd, Jesus Christ, won't abandon, betray, or mislead us, as we reopen the next chapter of our life together, here at St Peter's and in the community of Playford City. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.