

## Reflecting on God's Word

Reading: John 10:1-10 (NT page 1076)

Reader: Rose Reid

### Background to the reading

In our reading this morning Jesus compares Himself with a Good shepherd in comparison to thieves and robbers. Why is saying this? Who are the thieves and the robbers?

The key to understand our reading lies with verse 22 that we did not read who says: "22 Then came the Festival of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple courts walking in Solomon's Colonnade."

The Festival of Dedication was first initiated in the year 164 Before Christ as a feast in honor after divine worship in the temple was resored. The emperor Antiochus Epiphanes, a Syrian dishonored the temple of God by erecting a "Greek altar" on the site of the old Holy one on the 25 of the month Chislev, a day that falls at various points on our calendar month of December in the year 167. On this day the emperor worshipped the Greek god Zeus. He called himself "Epiphanes" which meant "(god) manifest". A Jewish rebellion broke out when a priest called Mattathias and his five sons, rebelled against these evil practices of Antioch. After three years of fearsome fights, they managed to dedicate the temple again, 3 years later - on the same day 25 Chislev 164 before Christ. This feast lasted for 8 days and later became the Feast of Lights or "Hanukkah" - the only Jewish festival not ordained in the Hebrew Bible.

So in our reading, it is within this context that we need to understand what Jesus was trying to say. He is telling his readers that the current Jewish leaders are behaving just like the emperor Antioch. They are misleading the people with their wrong perceptions and in the process reject the true message from God. He - **Jesus** is send by God and is therefore God himself. He is the only true Shepherd in contrast to the Jewish leaders or Antioch who is like the hired shepherds who only cares about themselves. John's readers could also easily rely on the richness of the Old Testament texts with regard to God as the Shepherd in texts such as Ezekiel 34, Jeremiah 23 and Psalm 23,

which identify the Lord as the true shepherd in contrast to the false shepherds of Israel.

But to us this image Jesus is portraying does not make sense especially because our understanding of farming with sheep is totally different from sheep farming in Biblical times. Sheep were very important to the people of Biblical times. Sometimes it was their only source of income. They had many usages of sheep – they could make clothes from the wool, they could make shoes from the sheep's skin, they could eat the meat of the sheep and they could drink milk from the sheep.

Palestine was a very dry place and sometimes people hired Shepherds to stay with their sheep, sleep with their sheep in order to protect them from wild animals, thieves and robbers. The shepherd would then in the mornings talk to the sheep and lead them with his voice to green pastures and safe waters. The sheep was used to his voice and followed him. The shepherds would know the sheep by name.

Usually they had sheep pens enclosed by stone walls with only one entrance or gate. During the cool winter months, sheep were kept inside a pen at night. It was also custom for the shepherd to sleep across the opening to serve as a gate and protector of the sheepfold. Anyone that did not use the main gate could not have good intentions. They are the thieves and the robbers. They only have one intention and that is to "kill, steal and destroy" something that the emperor Antioch really did previously.

But Jewish law distinguished thieves from robbers: the former broke in, whereas the latter often lived in the wilderness and assaulted passersby. Shepherds continually had to guard against losing sheep to either kind of enemy.

Jesus said to his listeners that He is the gate for the sheep. He is the only entrance to the everlasting kingdom, unlike the Jewish leaders who teaches them differently. Whoever believes in Him, will be saved. Whoever comes into the pen, will be safe. Amen

**MP 200**

**Great is Thy faithfulness**

**Sermon**

Jesus draws a sharp line between a life in the pen and the life outside the pen. Everyone who is in the pen will be safe from the onslaughts of thieves and robbers or in other words life in general.

When Jesus died He gave each one of us a key to enter through the gate of belonging to Him. When He was resurrected on the third day He gave each one of us the ability to go through the gate and experience new life. When He ascended to heaven, He gave each one of us His Holy Spirit to guide and help us to find the sheep pen.

No one sitting in this church – no one in this world have an excuse any more why they cannot belong to the Shepherd. No one can honestly say they do not know the way to enter.

We all have choices to make. Some of us choose to have a life without the Shepherd, outside the safety of the sheep pen. Some of us choose to be exposed to the onslaughts of life while others who are in the sheep pen have the safety of a Shepherd who cares deeply about his children, a Shepherd who will help and guide. A shepherd who will be there when the going gets tough, when all relationships on earth fail, when illness and strife bring us down, when we struggle in an abusive relationship, when our children struggle with alcohol and drugs, when our wrong choices bring us tears.

There is a big difference between the life in the pen and the life outside the pen.

And the only way people will see what life is like inside the pen is how we live our lives, how we act in our relationships, in the way we love, in the way we forgive, in the way we treat one another in this fellowship. I am sometimes saddened to see how strained some relationships are in this congregation. I often wonder when I sit with rival groups of people, feeling their tension, feeling their disapproval for one another, what would someone who does not come to church say about all this?

I think we as believers in this village - are our biggest enemy. Yes we are our own enemies in the way we bear witness to our Heavenly Shepherd.

We have so many opportunities where we can show in public that we have a Shepherd who cares about us and because He cares about us, we care about our fellow brothers and sisters. We have the cozy caf, the women's rural, the involvement in the community trust, in the new computer classes that we will run with Bethany Christian trust, we have the mother and toddler group, the Guides...

I want to conclude with a story that I read on the website:

Two men were called on, in a large classroom, to recite the Twenty-third Psalm. One was an orator trained in speech technique and drama. He repeated the psalm in a powerful way. When he finished, the audience cheered and asked for an encore that they might hear his wonderful voice again. Then the other man repeated the same words-- 'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want...' but when he finished, no sound came from the class. Instead, people sat in a mood of deep devotion and prayer.

Then the first man stood to his feet. "I have a confession to make," he said. "The difference between what you have just heard from my friend, and what you heard from me is this: I know the Psalm, but my friend knows the Shepherd."

May this difference be just as obvious whenever we meet other people!

Amen