

Acts 9:36-43

36 In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor.
37 About that time she became ill and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room.
38 Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, 'Please come at once!'
39 Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood round him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.
40 Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning towards the dead woman, he said, 'Tabitha, get up.' She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up.
41 He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive.
42 This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. 43 Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.

John 10:22-30

22 Then came the Festival of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter,
23 and Jesus was in the temple courts walking in Solomon's Colonnade.
24 The Jews who were there gathered round him, saying, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.'
25 Jesus answered, 'I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify about me,
26 but you do not believe because you are not my sheep.
27 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.
28 I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.
29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.
30 I and the Father are one.'

Tell us plainly John 10:22-30

This incident comes near the very end of Jesus ministry, about 4 months before the Passover, and during the festival of Dedication, now known as Hanukkah. And Jesus is in Solomon's colonnade, which was a favourite place to meet in winter, and it became the place where the first Christians would meet after the resurrection (Acts 5:12. *all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade*). We're at the point where opposition to Jesus was growing, which you can see if you read John 8, 9 and 10. He was being repeatedly challenged as to who He was, but he would not publicly state that He was the Messiah because of the political risks, but mainly because the timing had to be right. He had however made statements which made it obvious, particularly John 8:58: '*Before Abraham was, I am*', using the name God attributed to himself.

So the opening exchange with the Jews is a bit exasperating: '*How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.*' Jesus answered, '*I did tell you, but you do not believe.*' This is a perfect illustration of unbelief, which demonstrates the nature of faith, which is rooted in trust in God – that which cannot be *proven* either way – although our belief is still founded on actual widely witnessed historic events.

Without the resurrection of Jesus there would be no church. The conviction of the Pharisees was based on the teaching of the Torah and of Jewish tradition, but today in the 21st century our society has largely evolved into a science based, technologically driven culture which refuses to accept anything at face value unless it is in some way measurable by what is described as 'facts', although as we all know 'facts' can also be very subjectively interpreted, and are often anything but factual. But it explains why faith is a subject of ridicule for so many in the present day.

There is a desperate human need for certainty. The statement 'tell us *plainly*' (v.24) as if somehow that's all it will take for them to suddenly become disciples. But there is no desire for truth, merely an imagined form of words which will never be enough. I think that for someone to truly receive what is the gift of faith there's always an element of supernatural revelation to a heart which is open to the necessity of repentance and of Jesus being exactly who he said He was, which cannot ever be manufactured. In many ways it remains a mystery.

Even Jesus himself, in the face of people's genuine freedom to walk away, was ultimately unable to 'tell them all plainly'. How do we know this? *John 7:43 the people were divided because of Jesus. Some wanted to seize him, but no-one laid a hand on him.* Some people just do not want to know. And we must live with the reality.

Sheep - here is a derogatory term in the present day, used in political discussion for people who have no intelligence or discernment and blindly follow a particular conviction. As used by Jesus, to anyone who knew anything about sheep and their apparent compulsion to get themselves into trouble, this probably also caused derision. But this was Jesus' challenge to the arrogant human assumption that we can solve our own problems and learn from experience, proved decisively wrong by centuries of mistakes. History has to repeat itself – no one listens. Jesus offers as proof all the things he has done: the freeing of people from suffering and addiction, lives transformed permanently, and made fruitful, and yet this just provokes more anger and resentment. There is a blindness to what is good and true which we still see all around us today. When the Archbishop ventures a suggestion that something is wrong it's suggested that he should stick to things spiritual, as though morality has absolutely nothing to do with the deceit and corruption we witness going on around us on a daily basis.

27 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.

28 I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.

Sheep do learn the sound of their shepherd's voice and can be kept on a safe path as a result. But the concept is lost on those who fail to accept that God and not human intelligence is the ultimate source of wisdom.

We even aspire to somehow creating eternal life for ourselves - something that will never happen, although God offers the very same to those who would follow Christ, and finds it rejected. Our reading ends at verse 30 with the startling statement that *'I and the Father are one'*, but if you were to read the whole chapter it's the teaching about the Good Shepherd which has attracted the bizarre claim that Jesus is demon-possessed, and in verse 31 provokes the Jews to such anger that they attempt to stone him to death, neatly sidestepping the fact of all the good things He has done and denying the claim that He is the very Messiah they have all been waiting for, prophesied in their own scripture by Isaiah and many others.

So I think the challenge to us is the question which comes back to us again and again in the gospels, do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the Messiah? That He is completely to be trusted? That everything in John's account is true, as he witnessed first hand?

That Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life?

And if so will we act on our belief, and follow Him?

Amen.