

2. The reasons for Christmas - Why did Jesus come? He came to offer abundant Life

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Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 00] We turn now to our Bible reading. I'm sorry, we've got the wrong reference here on the sheet for today. It should be John's Gospel, chapter 10, not Luke, chapter 10. John's Gospel, chapter 10 and verses 1 to 15. And if you'd like to follow that, you'll find it on page 896 in our Visitor's Bibles. John's Gospel, chapter 10 and verse 1.

Jesus speaks, Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers. This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So Jesus again said to them, Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees. And the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the father knows me and I know the father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord and may the Lord indeed make it a blessing to us. And during these last three Wednesdays before Christmas, we are looking at three sayings of Jesus from the Gospels in which he explains why he came to the earth in the first place.

[2 : 52] And this is a very useful exercise, I think, for us to do at this time of the year because in the face of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer and Jingle Bells, it's very healthy for us to be reminded of the real reasons why we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. Last week we were looking at Luke's Gospel, chapter 9, verse 10, where Jesus says to Zacchaeus, the Son of Man came, here's the reason, to seek and to save the lost. And this week our verse is John, chapter 10, verse 10, the second part of the verse, I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

So Jesus came to seek and to save the lost so that having sought them and saved them, they should then have life and have it in big helpings, abundantly, lots of it. It's a lovely phrase, don't you think, for Jesus to use there, abundant life. It conjures up pictures of unfettered joy, sweet experiences, peace and plenty, happy and fruitful relationships with both God and man. There's something lavish and generous and extravagant, exuberant about this idea of abundant life for members of Christ's flock. But there's something about this passage in John, chapter 10, which we need to notice. And that is that Jesus is saying these words, not to a group of well-wishers and committed disciples, but to a largely hostile audience, to people who at best were suspicious of him and at worst were beginning to think of how they could do away with him, how they could kill him. So it wasn't a meeting of this kind, with people sitting very respectfully listening to the speaker and so on, people who wouldn't dream of throwing a rotten tomato at the speaker. Put that tomato away, Will Lent.

It wasn't like that, you see. The audience here in John, chapter 10, there were some friends present, but many of these people listening were enemies. Now, how do we know this? Well, look at verse 7. Jesus again said to them. Well, who is the them? They're mentioned in verse 6 as well, where the evangelist tells us that they didn't understand what Jesus was saying to them. So we have to look back into verse 40 of chapter 9, where we discover that it's a group of Pharisees who are having a conversation, a ding-dong, you might almost say, but certainly a conversation with Jesus. And in the last verse of chapter 9, Jesus is telling these people that they are spiritually blind and guilty before God. Now, these people are religious leaders whose words and attitudes reveal that they are rejecting Jesus. Remember how back in the first chapter of John's Gospel, John tells us that Jesus came to his own people, to the Jews, but his own people did not receive him. And here we have a classic example of members of his own people not receiving him. And we learn even more of what is going on here if we look back to chapter 9, verse 39. Jesus said to these Pharisees, for judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind. It's another why he came into the world saying, isn't it, in verse 39. And why did he come, according to that verse? It was to force a division between those who receive him and those who reject him. His coming into the world separates the world's population into two great divisions. Those whose eyes are opened to see who he is, and those whose eyes are blinded to him. Jesus never came to unite society. He came rather to divide it. And this is exactly what happens at the end of the Good Shepherd passage. Look with me at chapter 10, verse 19.

There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. So he's just given them this sermon on the Good Shepherd, and it causes division. Verse 20, many of them said he has a demon and is insane.

Why listen to him? Others said these are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind? So this audience here has a lot of bristling and hostile people in it. He speaks these lovely words about the Good Shepherd bringing abundant life, and a lot of his hearers at the end, verse 20, say he is demon-possessed. He's crazy.

[7 : 34] Now, once we're aware of this hostile atmosphere, I think it helps us to see what Jesus is doing in this Good Shepherd speech in verses 1 to 18. He is not instructing the already converted.

He is purposefully opening up yet further the chasm between those who are his and those who are not his. He is preaching the gospel here, that's what's going on, with the intention on the one hand of hardening the opposition to him, and on the other hand of showing those who are being drawn to him what a wonderful and magnificent thing it is to put themselves in the care of a shepherd like this.

Now, just think of that second group of people, the people who are being drawn to Christ. In fact, you might like to think of yourself as being one of them. No, you're not yet a Christian, but you're very interested in Jesus, and you're there in that crowd because you want to listen to him.

You sense that what he has to say is of supreme importance, so your ears are pricked, and you're listening to this Good Shepherd sermon very eagerly. Now, what is Jesus teaching you as a person who is not yet quite a follower of his?

Well, first of all, he is warning you about the thieves and the robbers. He's saying to you, don't be so naive as to think that all who claim to be religious are true and good.

[9 : 06] The fact is that there are plenty of thieves and robbers about. And in this context, surely he is referring to these very Pharisees who are hardening their attitude towards him.

Some of them are listening to him at this very moment, and they're looking daggers at him. And we know what they're about to say about him in verse 20. Demonic, crazy. And what is their intention towards the ordinary people?

What sort of relationship did the Pharisees want to have with the ordinary Jews? Well, Jesus tells us at the beginning of verse 10, the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.

So Jesus is saying to the potential sheep, you must be wise about these Jewish leaders. Don't be ignorant about their real intentions towards you.

They are not benevolent religious teachers. They want to steal you from me. They want to possess you and dominate you, and ultimately to squeeze the very life out of you.

[10 : 07] If you allow yourselves to be gripped by the oppressive straitjacket of Pharisaic Judaism, you will perish. These people have no good intentions towards you.

They want to enslave you. Now, friends, just to leave our John chapter 10 for a moment, the same will always be true of any institutionalized religion which is characterized by rules and regulations, if you like, by law only and not by grace.

It is only Jesus, full of grace and truth, who brings and offers abundant life. So we have to read our verse 10 in its entirety.

Jesus is not simply saying, I came to bring abundant life. He's saying that he brings abundant life against the backdrop of a different form of religion which destroys people.

Just to give an example of this, I have a friend who lives down in London whose name is Vijay Menon. And you'll understand from the name Vijay that he comes from India, from South India.

[11 : 16] And for many years, Vijay had been a committed Hindu. But at the age of about 33 or 35, he was converted to Christ. And he's now 70 plus.

He's a tireless evangelist and preacher. And Vijay says this about Hinduism. And he wasn't a nominal Hindu. He was a committed Hindu. He says, don't believe for a moment that Hinduism is a benevolent, happy faith.

It's nothing of the kind. He says, the gods of Hinduism are immoral and those who worship them are enslaved by them. It was such a relief to Vijay to come to Christ and find liberty.

Another famous example is that of Martin Luther, who was a young monk in early 16th century Germany, found his conscience unbearably burdened by a sense of guilt and sin before God.

This was just before the Reformation, when the unreformed Roman Church was still ecclesiastically in the ascendancy in Europe. But when Luther discovered the real gospel from the New Testament, that Christ had come precisely to free him from this burden of guilt, he realized that Christ had not come to weigh him down, but to give him liberty.

[12 : 29] And he found it. So returning to John chapter 10, the folk in the crowd who were listening to Jesus realized that Jesus was holding out two alternatives before them.

He was saying to them, either you entrust your lives to these people, these Pharisees, or you can entrust yourselves to me. But be warned.

If you follow their lead, if you put yourselves in their power, you will come to grief because their intention is to destroy you. The thief comes to steal and kill and destroy.

But if you will entrust yourselves to my care, you will have life and you'll have it abundantly. So let's see from the passage some of the elements that make this abundant life so good and so desirable.

Well, the picture Jesus is using, obviously, is that of the shepherd who is caring for the sheep. And I'd like to point out three things from the passage. First, the shepherd calls his own sheep by name.

[13 : 36] He calls them individually by name. There it is, partway through verse three. The sheep hear his voice and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

So the shepherd comes along to the sheepfold and he calls out each name. Black ear, flossy, twinkle toes, scruffy. That's me on a Saturday.

And, of course, if the shepherd knows each one by name, it means that he knows a great deal about each of his sheep. I live out in North Ayrshire in the country and we have a few acres of rough pasture attached to our house.

And a local man brings some of his sheep to graze them on our few acres. Interestingly, his name is Mr. Shepherd. And sometimes when Mr. Shepherd comes along to deal with the sheep, I will have a little chat with him.

He has to come every now and again and treat them for foot rot and maggots and clip them in the summer and so on. And I'm amazed to discover just how much he knows about each of these sheep.

[14 : 39] They all look the same to me, but not to him. He knows about the family history of each one, its parents, its grandparents. He understands the strong points and the weak points of each animal.

He knows which ones are more susceptible to foot rot, which ones have a troublesome digestive system and hiccup a lot, which ones are going to win the championship at the local show. He knows about them because he cares about them.

Now, this is really what Jesus is saying about each sheep in his flock. He knows the name of each one that belongs to him. And he knows not only the name of each of his individual sheep, but he knows everything about each one.

He knows the strengths and the weaknesses of each one. He is thoroughly acquainted with the odd features, with the personal peculiarities of each one.

Are you not personally peculiar? Of course you are. Well, so am I. But if we belong to Jesus, these personal peculiarities are deeply understood by him.

[15 : 47] The sinful peculiarities he'll be working on to remove. But as for the rest of our quirks and characteristics, he knows them. It is good to be known by him.

That is part of abundant life. He calls his own sheep, each one by name. Conversely, the ultimate desolation is not to be known by him.

Then second, the shepherd leads his sheep and they follow him. Still in verse 3, having called his own sheep by name, he leads them out.

And verse 4, when he's brought out all his own, he goes before them and the sheep follow him for they know his voice. Now this too is part of abundant life. The sheep knows the shepherd's voice.

There's this bond of belonging between the sheep and the shepherd. And the sheep, knowing that they belong to the shepherd, then follow him. Now this is one of the distinctive features of being a Christian.

[16 : 56] The Christian follows Christ. Whereas the person who is not a Christian, even though he may admire Christ, does not follow him. Whom does the non-Christian follow?

Well, at one level, at a rather superficial level, he may follow a political leader. He may say, I follow Gordon Brown. He may say, I follow Alex Salmond.

The political side of the man may lean in one direction or another. Or in sport, a man might follow Celtic or might follow Rangers. He may have a deep love for his football team.

He might literally follow his team around the country Saturday by Saturday, Dundee, Aberdeen and so on. And then with other parts of his nature, he might follow a rock band or a great opera singer.

But at a deeper level, at the level of real reality, the New Testament shows us that the person who is not a Christian follows the devil. The Apostle Paul, in Ephesians chapter 2, speaks of those who are not Christians as following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, which is a phrase describing the devil.

[18 : 12] Jesus says exactly the same thing in John chapter 8 to those who refuse to come to him. He says, You are of your father, the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires.

It can be a startling revelation to the person who is not a Christian to discover that his real leader is Satan. But that is the New Testament's unambiguous statement about his position.

The fact is that men and women were created to follow Jesus Christ as our leader and shepherd. Only in that relationship will there be abundant life and liberty and joy.

Just as the nut is made for the bolt and the wallpaper is made for the wall, so you and I are made to follow Christ. It is only in following him that we discover a real human existence.

Liberty from bondage, joy and gladness, and abundant life. Only in him. So first, the shepherd calls his sheep by name.

[19 : 22] Second, he leads his sheep and they follow him. And then third, the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. There it is in verse 11.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Now friends, has it struck you just how very strange that idea is?

The idea that there is something good about the shepherd laying down his life for the sheep. Think of the millions of sheep that there are in the British Isles.

Would it be good for them if their shepherds were all to die tomorrow? I doubt it rather. I would have thought that the death of shepherds up and down the British Isles tomorrow would be very bad news for the sheep of Britain.

Just imagine a flock of sheep with their shepherd on a typical Scottish farm. It's winter time, it's December, so the sheep have all been gathered off the hills and they're together in a big barn.

[20 : 25] A lot of sheep. There's the flock. And one day, the shepherd, as usual, comes out in the morning and he sees to their needs. Beautifully. He tends to their watering, their feeding, the troughs are full, hay, concentrates, mangle wurzels, fresh straw for putting under their feet and for bedding.

Lovely. But then, in full sight of the flock there in the barn, the shepherd begins to climb the steel ladder up the side of the silo tower, which is just there beside the barn.

And he climbs right up to the very top of the tower, 80 foot tall, and balancing himself on the very top of the silo, he then launches himself out.

And as he lets himself go, he cries to the sheep, my dear sheep, I love you, I love you so much that I'm doing this for you. And he lands flat on the concrete and kills himself.

And one sheep turns to another and says to her, in what conceivable way, Eustacia, is that a demonstration of love?

[21 : 29] Now, the answer to the riddle is all in the little word for, F-O-R. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

It means on behalf of, for the sake of. It's a word from the vocabulary of sacrifice. It means quite simply that the good shepherd lays down his life so as to save the lives of the sheep.

It is not a gratuitous, absurd act of suicide. This is life for life, one life given to save another. It's the voluntary laying down of his life so as to rescue many.

If a father dives into the sea to rescue his drowning child, with the result that the child lives and the father is lost, the father has then laid down his life to save the child's life.

It's a purposeful act of self-sacrifice done so as to bring rescue. Now that is the nature of the death of the good shepherd. It's not a meaningless suicide, but a purposeful act of rescue motivated by unutterable love so that the sheep should be able to enjoy abundant life.

[22 : 49] Now isn't it sad that some people in this crowd in John 10 hearing these wonderful words should turn to each other and say this man is demon possessed.

He's lost his mind. What do we say? Do we want abundant life? It's ours for the taking.

To be a Christian is to be in the care of the good shepherd. Abundant life begins with him. He calls his sheep by name.

He knows each one. And these sheep reject the devil's leadership and follow their good shepherd. And they know that they are eternally rescued because he has laid down his life for that very purpose.

Why did he come? I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray to him.

[23 : 56] Lord Jesus who are we that you should have acted like this towards us? We know that we are by nature rebels against you and have not loved you or God the Father with all our hearts.

And yet you have done this. You have come with the express purpose of laying down your life so that ours should be rescued. and so that we should then have this abundant joyful life of living in your company and in the company of your redeemed people of listening to your voice and following and knowing that you know each of us so deeply.

So our prayer dear Lord is for your richest life blessing to be upon us. For any here who have not yet entrusted themselves to your care.

we do pray that you will lovingly draw them so that they might come to believe and follow you. And for those of us who are already your followers we pray that you will deepen our joy, our understanding and our delighted service.

And we ask it for your dear name's sake. Amen.