

JOHN 10: 7 – 15 ‘LIFE IN ALL ITS FULLNESS’ 29TH OCTOBER, 2023

After my parents died, when Anne and I were going through things in the Cottage in Guernsey where I grew up, I came across my school life in a suitcase. I looked randomly at some reports and came across one from the school chaplain saying, in essence, ‘He is not one of us’. So, he would be surprised that I am standing here addressing you today.

I’m rather surprised too – it’s a remarkable testament to the patience our Lord has with His people, and to the support and encouragement of the fellowship of St. Paul’s, that I have this privilege. I am on the last lap of the Bishop’s Certificate course, and embarking on a further two years of Licensed Lay Ministry training; what do they say about retirement?

Simon invited me to contribute to the sermon series on favourite Bible passages, and I indicated John 10:10 to him, expanded to John 10:7-15 to put this verse in some helpful context.

I’ll explain why I’ve chosen that passage, and then turn to the passage itself.

So why this passage?

When Jean Kerr (some will remember her as a good friend of St Paul’s and leader of a couple of our away weekends), when Jean was Canon Missioner in Rochester Diocese, she persuaded the Diocese to buy some resources of the Ugly Duckling Company charity (UDC for short) for parishes to have, provided that parishes actually used them! UDC is a Christian charity producing missional resources aiming to enable people without any faith background to have conversations which may lead to exploring a journey of faith. Vince Short, our vicar at the time, couldn’t attend the presentation and give away, but he asked me to go. And after Vince led a UDC ‘Puzzling Questions’ course in the vicarage, he wasn’t able to go to the feedback session and so I went...

Long story short, after some probing chats over some months and several coffees with the CEO, who founded the charity, and his deputy, I became a trustee in 2018. The key UDC statement reads:

We are passionate about helping people to find life in all its fullness through the power of conversation.

And the newest UDC resource created for engagement with young people is called 10:10 because of its reference to ‘life in all its fullness’

All reasons for choosing this passage.

I should add that St. Paul's will be running a UDC course called RESOLVE on four evenings starting in January. RESOLVE was created for Chelmsford Diocese to offer to people who come to church each year at Christmas but maybe not during the year. I'll be leading that, and if you're interested in helping me do that, please see me afterwards, or get in touch later. I'll certainly need help!

And so to the passage.

Simon preached a few months ago on 'How to feed sheep' so I'd like to talk about **GATES, FULLNESS AND DOORS**

GATES first.

Jesus is talking here in parables about himself and the relationship he has with his followers. And he needs more than one go at this for his listeners to get a sense of his message; it's not surprising, really. It's hard enough for us after two thousand years of scholarly dissection to understand, but if you were there at the time listening to a radical, extraordinary person talking in parables, you might just miss their point.

In his second attempt, Jesus says clearly in verse 7 that he is the gate of the sheep. He says it again in verse 9 'I am the gate' and that 'whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture'. An alternative translation of 'be saved' is 'be kept safe'; Jesus contrasts the safety of the sheep pen with the thieves and robbers who have come before him, and are still circling around. Jesus is aiming here at the Pharisees.

And in verse 10 Jesus says the wonderfully encouraging words 'I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full'. There are other words in other Bible translations, including '...life in all its fullness' and '...that they may have life, and have it abundantly'.

This is central to our understanding of what it is to follow Christ; we are God's sheep and the only way we have of getting into the pasture of the sheep pen safely is through the gate of Christ.

But what of 'life in all its fullness'?

The first point to make is that this is absolutely not about prosperity or anything hinting at comfort, complacency and success in worldly terms. It's about fullness of life, with its ups and downs and challenges, all the while knowing that Christ is with

us, alongside us, standing as the gate for us to His green pasture where there is safety.

Think of this in terms of the weather. When I was working, I went to California a few times on business, often to Irvine in Orange County to a favourite client, whose trade mark BOTOX® I looked after in Europe for 25 years. And the weather was always warm and sunny, with a blue, cloudless sky.

But here in the UK, we have calm days, and stormy days, thunder, lightning, rain and days which are stunningly beautiful.

Think of 'life in all its fullness' as being like British weather, not Californian weather; life is changeable, unpredictable, challenging.

But that's only part of what fullness means, and we should explore a bit what Jesus was getting at when he spoke these words. At the prayer meeting we had on Zoom on Thursday, people had a chance to say what they thought these words meant, and what Jesus meant when he said them. There were mentions of 'a full life' not being exclusive to Christians; of the way we live our lives – not merely existing; of eternal life; of emotions and feelings.

A full life will mean different things to different people.

But what does Jesus mean? As often happens, we should expect Jesus to challenge our thinking, to turn things upside down. Might he mean that fullness of life for us means a life of discipleship and service? In Mark Chapter 8 verse 35 and 36, Jesus says 'For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the Gospel will save it. For what good is it for someone to gain the world but forfeit their soul'. There's food for another sermon, or a whole series, discussing how we, as God's people, live in and engage with the world, a broken, dangerous world exemplified by the tragic conflicts in the Middle East, but remain not 'of the world'. But I digress.

But we need to be active, not passive – the parable of the gold coins in Matthew chapter 25 and Luke chapter 19 makes it clear that we cannot simply sit on the talents we are given. But the fullness of our activity is in service to Christ, to work for God's Kingdom.

And it's always an anchor to hear what Jesus says about the key commandments, as Matthew reports in Chapter 22: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind' and also 'Love your neighbour as yourself'.

I hope we can all reflect on all these words as they give us a sense of what Jesus means in John 10:10 about coming so that they – or really we, as his sheep – may have life in all its fullness.

Reverting to the weather analogy, with Christ alongside us, and as we work for God's Kingdom, whatever the weather blows at us, life is wonderfully full.

And I mentioned doors...

We have thought about Christ being the gate to the sheep pen through which we, as Christ's sheep can enter and find pasture.

But another entry point to reflect on as we head off into the week is the door to our lives, over which God has given us control. Before you leave today, have a look, or in many cases another look, at the big painting at the back of church, under the West window. It's a copy, painted by a previous St Paul's vicar, of Holman Hunt's 'Light of the World', an interpretation of Chapter 3 verse 20 in the Book of Revelation:

'Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me'.

And there's no handle on the outside of the door; it's our choice about whether we open it. I pray that we do; it will open the door to life in all its fullness.

Amen