

CCV, Jn 10:22-30

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Why do people do bad things? Why are other people's choices, or even our own choices, so often so wrong, confused and misguided? It can be very frustrating when someone we're close to or who we're responsible for makes a bad choice, whether it's children, other family members or close friends. It might be taking a job we think will be bad for them, being with partner we're convinced is not any good or a foolish use of money. It may of course be that we're wrong and they're right, and we should always be open to that possibility. But either way, there's still the question, why do people make bad choices?

I think we can explore that question by thinking about the most fundamental choice we will all make. That is, whether or not to believe in Jesus Christ, whether or not to follow Jesus, whether or not to be Christians. That is really the most important choice we can make. Firstly, because, if we do that, we have the certain promise of God, that whatever else may happen to us in this life, our eternal, joyful and beautiful future with God is secure forever. Secondly, because if we choose to follow Jesus, we will make all our subsequent choices in the light of that, from what job to do, to who to choose as a life-partner or where to live. Of course, Jesus doesn't tell us exactly what to do about all those things, but the Bible and the Christian faith do give really helpful principles that help us approach those decisions wisely. What's more, following Jesus affects all of our little everyday choices: how we talk to and about our colleagues; how we talk to and about our families; what we spend our little spare time and money on; do we find a way to fit prayer and reading the Bible into our daily routines. Christians are people who try to let their faith make an impact on all those areas. Of course, we all too rarely succeed, which is why our service always begins with that confession prayer and the absolution to remind us that we're forgiven, but we certainly want to try and let following Jesus affect all our other choices, great and small.

So, then what determines how people make that choice? What determines whether people follow Jesus? Well, Jesus addresses that question in the Gospel reading, in his dialogue with some Jewish leaders. They ask him in v.24 “if you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”

It’s important that these Jewish leaders are hostile to Jesus. They’re not people who want to believe in him, but are agonising because the evidence isn’t enough. They’re not people who are deeply attracted by Jesus, but struggle with questions like “why does God allow so much suffering” or “why are there so many different religions.” They’re not people on a journey, getting to know and grappling with the Christian faith. We’re privileged to have a number of people like that in our church. If that’s you and it would be helpful to talk to me about your thinking, please do grab me after the service.

The Jewish leaders in the passage are people who are deliberately hostile to Jesus. They ask him to tell them plainly if he’s the Messiah. He already has told them, in word and deed and so, he answers, v.25 “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.” In other words, there is enough evidence, there are enough arguments, there are more than enough reasons to believe.

John, the writer of our passage, loves symbolism, and I’m sure it’s deliberate that he sets this conversation in winter, during the festival of dedication, which has in modern Judaism become the festival of Hannukah. In other words, this is happening when it’s dark, because these leaders Jesus is talking to are walking in darkness because they are deliberately rejecting him.

Jesus says that the reason they do not believe is that they are not his sheep.

What does that mean? It’s an image he’s introduced earlier in the chapter and now develops. Jesus is the good shepherd and we are his sheep.

Our psalm this Sunday is the very famous, Psalm 23, when the Psalmist says “the Lord is my shepherd.” Jesus is the Lord, come to earth as a human being, so he naturally also says, I am the good shepherd. It’s an image we see, in many, many different parts of the Bible. But here, the emphasis is as much on us as the sheep, as on Jesus as the shepherd. What Jesus seems to say is that it is Jesus’ sheep who follow him.

vv.27-28: “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.”

The people who follow Jesus are the people who belong to him, who recognise his voice. It seems there is a group of people, Jesus’ sheep, who believe because they are Jesus’ sheep. Of course, this immediately raises lots of questions. What about the conscious choice many of us experience ourselves making to follow Jesus? I didn’t believe, because I was a sheep, I believed because I chose to. What about the non-sheep, the people who don’t believe? Does Jesus not care about them? Does he just ignore them? I will come to some of those questions in a moment, but first I want us to reflect on what a wonderful thing it is to be sheep of the good shepherd.

vv.27-28: “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.”

Eternal life is assured to sheep of the good shepherd. Whatever else may go wrong, the big picture of the future is utterly secure. Jesus will take us to an eternal home, of peace and joy and glory and beauty. That is certain, because he is our shepherd and we are his sheep. No one can snatch us out of his hand. No one and nothing can stop us reaching that eternal inheritance.

Many people and things make it very difficult for us to believe in Jesus. Sickness may have the power to stop our bodies working and to bring lots of pain and discomfort to our everyday lives, but it cannot stop us following Jesus. It cannot snatch us out of his hand. It cannot separate us from life eternal.

Financial and employment struggles may have the power to stop us having many things we want and indeed many things we need, but they cannot stop us following Jesus. They cannot snatch us out of his hand. They cannot separate us from life eternal.

A deeply unpleasant, unkind person we have to deal with at work, or even at home can make our lives very painful, but they cannot stop us following Jesus. They cannot snatch us out of his hand. They cannot separate us from life eternal.

That's why the Psalm says: "he makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me besides quiet waters", not because life is always easy; it certainly isn't. But because life's hardships cannot stop us following Jesus nor can they stop us being with him in the end.

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and staff they comfort me...surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long."

This is why it is so wonderful to be a sheep of the Lord Jesus: because we have the certain knowledge of his comforting presence in the now, and his eternal joy in the future.

It is all guaranteed, in v.29-30, by the relationship between Jesus and the Father.

*vv.29-30*: "What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."

The translation and indeed the underlying Greek manuscripts of v.29 are rather complicated and I would love to talk to anyone for an hour about them if you're interested, but I think the basic message is clear. The Father has given the sheep to the Lord Jesus. The sheep belong to Jesus because they first belonged to the Father. Jesus can no more let go of the sheep than he can let go of the Father. He cannot let go of the Father, because, as v.30 says, "the father and I are one." The eternal security of

Jesus sheep, the eternal joy of Jesus' sheep, rests on nothing less than the very being of God. God will have to stop being God, before Jesus' sheep lose their eternal joy with him. The most fundamental reality will have to stop before Jesus' sheep lose their place with him forever.

As I said, this raises lots of questions. What about people who stop being Christians? That's true for many of our children or other people we know. One answer is that they never truly believed in the first place, but it's also very possible that they will one day, somehow come back. Jesus will call them back, because they are his sheep. No one can snatch his sheep out of his hand. Sometimes he might call people back in the last moments of their lives, before they have chance to tell anyone and we might never know. If there's someone you know, who doesn't believe or who doesn't believe anymore, this passage is a great encouragement to pray for them, because it's God who's in charge of who believes and who doesn't. The good shepherd calls to his sheep and they will listen to his voice. If the reason people do or don't choose to believe lies with the good shepherd, then let's be asking the good shepherd to speak so people hear his voice and make good choices.

And then what about the people who are thinking about believing, who maybe want to believe but struggle with difficult questions? As I say, there are a number of folks like that here today and you're very welcome. Well, of course, from our human perspective, we do have a choice. You can choose today to believe in Jesus. If you do, that shows us that you are one of his sheep. You show, by the choice you freely make, that he is calling you. So, don't you want to make that choice? Don't you want to follow him? Don't you want to be one of his sheep and hear his voice, to be eternally secure? Do talk to me or Patrick, or a Christian you know, if that would help.

Perhaps you're a follower of Jesus going through a time of doubt and uncertainty in your faith. In that case, be encouraged that Jesus will keep hold of you. No-one can snatch you out of his hand. That includes not just external challenges but internal doubts and fears. We ourselves, our own doubts and fears, cannot snatch us from Jesus' hand.

If you are a confident follower of Jesus, then be encouraged that whatever else may happen, no-one and nothing can snatch you from his hand, so keep listening to the good shepherd's voice.