

Easter 4, 2016

Our gospel reading this morning is a classic passage from John's gospel, in some ways, full of unnecessary detail [I wonder which sentence struck you as I read it?]. It's the recounting of a small incident, but something that John has been mulling over in the light of Jesus' resurrection. There are some things in it that don't add anything to the story. But they do remind us that this is an eye-witness account of events, as close to the action as it is possible to get.

When I was training, received wisdom was that Mark was the earliest gospel, mainly because the other two synoptic gospels, that is Matthew and Luke, both quote Mark, as well as another gospel Q which hasn't yet been found. However, the recent finding in Egypt of an early papyrus fragment has persuaded scholars that it's possible that John's gospel may have been written before Mark. They certainly have a very different feel and purpose. But also John's gospel is thought to have been written by John the Disciple of Jesus, the one who in his gospel is only referred to as 'the beloved disciple'. The one who was with Jesus, who was an eye-witness, and who then spent his life in spreading the gospel.

So John tells us not only that the events of our reading today took place during the festival of Dedication, but also that it was winter, and Jesus is very precisely located walking in the portico of Solomon of the new Temple that was being dedicated. I wonder what John meant us to understand from these important details. Maybe he is referring to a deeper winter, a spiritual one in which the religious leaders have battened down the hatches, and huddled round the fire, keeping the warmth for themselves and not caring for the people.

The teaching talks about sheep, a metaphor beloved, not just of Jesus, but of the Jewish scriptures with which those around him would have been very familiar. In the OT book of Ezekiel for example, the priests and religious leaders are described as bad shepherds. But Jesus' description of himself and how he works is of the good shepherd, the one who knows the sheep and who the sheep follow. This fits with the

description of a Jewish shepherd of the time, the sheep weren't driven from behind as we do in this country, but led by the shepherd going in front. It was important then that the sheep know the shepherd's voice. And they would get to know the shepherd's voice as they were born with his help into the flock and grew up with him caring for them, and as they followed him to good pastures. I wonder how easy we find it to recognise Jesus' voice? Do we spend our time close to him, listening to his words, learning to recognise his beloved voice even over the wildest winter weather? Or is it perhaps winter in our hearts, a time when we close down and are too preoccupied with trying to stay in our own warmth, even if we are in a place where food is not plentiful, and the cold strikes deep. Perhaps we would do better to listen to the voice of our shepherd, Jesus, and follow him.