

## John 10:22-30

*It was the time of the festival of Dedication, when Israel was celebrating the nation's deliverance. The text specifies where in the Temple Jesus was walking - the portico of Solomon, an area at the southeast end of the outer court that would have provided the most protection from the winter weather. The leaders had Messiah on their minds, but this was not the man they had in mind for the job. And so they gathered around him in a threatening manner. In a strange twist on Jesus' words in 10:27 ("My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me"), they know him and gather around him, but to felle him, not to follow him. They ask a question and demand an answer they seem already to know and to fear. "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly" (10:24). His miracles and teachings, the works of his hands, had already answered that question for them. They just wanted his confirmation. This was not for the first time a dispute had broken out between Jesus and the religious authorities. The debate was about who had the authority to speak and act for God. The Sadducees controlled the temple with its God-given feasts, ceremonies and rituals, while Pharisees controlled the synagogues, where attention was focused on obedience to the law and keeping the commandments. If Sadducees and Pharisees both felt they had legitimate claims to be the shepherd of God's people and speak for God, evidently both resented the upstart from Galilee with His claim to be THE good shepherd of God's way, God's truth and God's life. Politics are at work in the background, the age-old struggle for power\*.*

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "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. 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. 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."

(\*Commentary by Rev Dr Russell Barr, Minister of Edinburgh Cramond Church, Church of Scotland, and Alyce McKenzie)

## Readings COCU34C

### Psalm 23 The Divine Shepherd/A Psalm of David

*Drawing on his experience as a shepherd, King David wonders how best to fulfil his role as the shepherd of Israel. As he ponders the question David is led to a deeper insight into God's relationship with people. David discerns something of God's love and comes to realise that as long as we live our life with faith in God then we will experience the reassurance and security that sheep experience in the presence of their trusted shepherd. David is also aware that life is not always easy or straightforward and illness, accident, bereavement and loss are part of the human experience. However convinced of the continuing concern, compassion and loyalty of God, David affirms God's loving presence will be as real in the dark and difficult days as it is in the days of sunshine. This leads David to his final insight, namely, not only is God's love unconditional, it is everlasting\*.*

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
**he restores my soul.**

He leads me in right paths  
for his name's sake.

**Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil;**  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—  
**they comfort me.**

You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
**my cup overflows.**

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.**

### **Acts 9:36-43**

*Joppa is the present Jaifa, some 15 km from Lydda, and the name 'Dorcas' is the Greek translation of 'Tabitha' and means 'gazelle'. Had the disciples sent for Peter so he could join them in mourning Tabitha? Did they imagine Peter would be able to 'do something' for Tabitha? When Peter arrives, the women are wearing the clothing Tabitha had given them while she was alive. She was always doing good and helping people who were poor and she is identified in the text as a disciple. Peter orders everyone out of the room, presumably because he does not want the miracle which is about to take place to be treated as a spectacle. 'Tabitha, get up', has echoes of what Jesus said to the young girl, 'Talitha cum' (Mark 5:41) and some scholars have wondered if this is the same story sometimes attributed to Jesus and sometimes to Peter. In his commentary Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit, Justo L Gonzalez notes Luke often links a story about a man with a story about a woman. Gonzalez also points out Peter remained in Joppa with Simon, a tanner, an occupation considered unclean by many Jews because it involved working with the skin of dead animals and in the following chapter we learn of Peter's extraordinary vision of unclean animals in Simon's house (Acts 10: 9-23)\*.*

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

### **Revelation 7:9-17**

*We are once again in the realm of inspired imagination not unlike an ancient eastern royal court. The slain lamb is the subversive symbol of honour. At its root this text is a belief in God the deliverer and the confidence that God still is a deliverer. The story of rescue from Egypt inspired the exiles in Babylonia to believe that their rescue would come. Successive generations would see their own plight in similar terms and hope for a similar rescue until it all seemed too much to be able to occur within history. A change must occur, a massive divine intervention. Hope in the face of overwhelming odds became focused on a day of resurrection when the righteous would be raised to a new kind of being. In some circles this went hand in hand with a day of judgement when fortunes would be reversed and the wicked receive their "just desserts". Revelation held out that kind of hope to the early Christians of Asia Minor who appear to have faced similarly overwhelming odds. Revelation has its own cycles of hope combined with images of judgement on the wicked. Ultimately it is asserting that beyond even the worst suffering there is hope, because there is God and because there is the God who is to be seen beside a slain lamb. (William Loader)*

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."