

3rd May 2020

Hearsall at Home

Hello, and welcome to Hearsall at Home.

We hope that you listen to this service either on a Sunday morning, or at another time, and you will worship, sing, pray and reflect on the scriptures along with all of us.

A written copy of the service is also available as a download on our website, so if you know anyone who would like that please let us know.

Also available is an extra resource: Bible study notes for those who would like to go deeper into the min texts of the service.

So sit down, relax and prepare yourself to worship God with us.

Tuning the heart in a noisy world

Welcome

Whether you be in Coventry, elsewhere in the UK or abroad, you are welcome to our service today which has the theme of *tuning our hearts in a noisy world*. So let's take a moment or two of quiet... Take a few quiet breaths and become aware of your body, and that you and your body live and move and have their existence in God.

Call to worship

John 10:10 - 11

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

We sing a setting of the 23rd Psalm.

Song (WT 405)

The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want;
He makes me lie in pastures green.
He leads me by the still, still waters,
His goodness restores my soul.

*And I will trust in You alone,
And I will trust in You alone,
For Your endless mercy follows me,
Your goodness will lead me home.*

He guides my ways in righteousness,
And He anoints my head with oil,
And my cup, it overflows with joy,
I feast on His pure delights.

And though I walk the darkest path,
I will not fear the evil one,
For You are with me, and Your rod and staff
Are the comfort I need to know.

Prayer & meditation

Lord Jesus Christ we draw close to you now and take a moment to tune our hearts to your still presence... You are the great Shepherd of the Sheep who gave his life for us all...

You gather into your arms those that have young
and you tend your flock like a shepherd:
You gather the lambs in your arms

and carry them close to your heart;
You gently lead those that have young.

You are my shepherd, I lack nothing.
You make me lie down in green pastures,
you lead me beside quiet waters,
you refresh my soul.

You guide me along the right paths
for your name's sake.

Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,

I will 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 your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
for ever.

Teach us to heed your voice, Good Shepherd.
Lead us out to good pasture and lead us home to a secure pen.
Forgive us for our wanderings away from you,
and keep us in the way of life everlasting. Amen

Our security as Christians comes from recognising Jesus' voice and following him as our shepherd into good pasture. We celebrate the vitality of knowing Jesus in our next song.

Song (WT 8)

All I once held dear, built my life upon
All this world reveres, and wars to own
All I once thought gain I have counted loss
Spent and worthless now, compared to this

*Knowing you, Jesus
Knowing you, there is no greater thing
You're my all, you're the best
You're my joy, my righteousness
And I love you, Lord*

Now my heart's desire is to know you more
To be found in you and known as yours
To possess by faith what I could not earn

All-surpassing gift of righteousness

Oh, to know the power of your risen life
And to know You in Your sufferings
To become like you in your death, my Lord
So with you to live and never die

Behind Closed Doors

Written by Dorothy Cobb, read by Sarah Lewis

From the beginning I have tried to keep to a routine, whenever possible doing household chores on the days I usually did them. I smiled to myself when listening to Stephen Fry giving helpful advice on living in isolation. He said to keep to a routine but take time to do everything more slowly. Dear Stephen, I've been doing that for several years now. I call it old age.

I have always liked doing crosswords and puzzles and that is now a part of my daily routine. I also spend part of most days sorting through wardrobes, drawers, cupboards etc. I now have bags of clothes for Coventry City Mission and Carriers of Hope and still have my china cabinet and bookcases to do.

I live in a block of 12 flats all with balconies, so we have been able to enjoy this beautiful weather and appreciate the benefits of cleaner air due to the lack of air pollution. Because there is very little traffic we can hear the small birds who are usually drowned out by the louder pigeons and magpies. Some of my neighbours are also dear friends and it is comforting to know they are close at hand. I am by far the oldest person in the block and they look out for me.

Before this pandemic started I was looking forward to flying to Spain to spend time with my son and his wife; that had to be cancelled. I used to be out of the house more than I was in during the day. So I miss my bus stop friends, going into town, visiting friends, going to the hairdresser's and of course my lovely Hearsall family. As I prepare my dinner on Wednesdays I do so thinking longingly of our delicious Lunch Club dinners.

I did have days when the thought of this isolation going on and on began to get to me. I like making plans, knowing what I will be doing and where I will be going. Then I remembered something my Grannie Turner used to say to me when I was little and couldn't have my own way and do what I wanted.. "Just you count your blessings my girl". I sat down and did just that. What a difference it has made. I have long been a maker of Lists. This one was entitled Blessings:

It begins with a thank you for family, friends and neighbours, for phone calls and offers of help.

Gratitude that my eldest son and his wife live close by and that with the internet I can see my other son, his wife and their dogs frequently on Skype.

Having Facebook and WhatsApp I can keep track of my granddaughter, nieces, nephews and their families.

The rest of my family and my church family

And a big thank you that we all have phones, imagine how hard it would be if we could only keep in touch by post.

Those blessings are always on my list and each day I find a new one for which to give thanks.

And then there is Sunday morning to look forward to when I sit down just before 10.30, imagine us all in church as we worship together. The services have been uplifting and yet very pertinent to the present situation, I have found the prayers of intercession very helpful and as always David's sermon leaves me with much to think about.

Because I am comfortable and reasonably contented with my lot I've had to deal with feelings of guilt; this frightening virus has and still is killing so many people the numbers are hard to comprehend. The front-line workers are struggling to cope not only with their workload but also the emotional stress. Dustbin men, bus drivers, delivery goods drivers, postmen and other workers including schoolteachers also put themselves at risk in order to help others. Here I am sitting comfortably at home being looked after. I thank God for their dedication.

Because of the enforced isolation I have had more time to think and to meditate. I have reread parts of favourite books and poems and thought a lot about the past and wondered about the future. In doing so I've realised that I really should live each day to the full and not waste time regretting things in the past and always needing to make plans for the future. I find this prayer by William Barclay very apt for the present situation.

Loving Father, help me to live one day at a time,

Not to be thinking of what might have been,

Not to be worrying about what may be.

Help me to accept the fact that I cannot undo the past

And I cannot foresee the future.

Help me to remember that I will never be tried beyond what I can bear;

That a Father's hand will never cause his child a needless tear;

That I can never drift beyond your love and care. Amen

Thanks Dorothy for your invitation to count our blessings, and thanks for sharing that lovely William Barclay prayer. Our next song invites God to shape us and use us for his loving purposes.

Hymn (WT 36)

Beautiful Lord, wonderful Savior

I know for sure all of my days are held in Your hand

And crafted into Your perfect plan

You gently called me into Your presence

Guiding me by Your Holy Spirit

Teach me dear Lord, to live all of my life

Through Your eyes

And I'm captured by Your Holy calling

Set me apart, I know You're drawing me to Yourself

Lead me Lord, I pray

*Take me and mold me, use me, fill me
I give my life to the Potter's hand
Call me, guide me, lead me, walk beside me
I give my life to the Potter's hand*

You gently call me into Your presence
Guiding me by Your Holy Spirit
Teach me dear Lord, to live all of my life
Through Your eyes
I'm captured by Your Holy calling
Set me apart, I know You're drawing me to Yourself
Lead me Lord, I pray

Offering

Take a moment now, as Dorothy did, to think of the blessings you've experienced this week. What gifts have you received from God?
And so now O Lord, as gifts flow from you to us in countless ways each day, we thank you for the joy and privilege of passing your gifts on. Take all of the gifts we offer to the church and to others. May they be a blessing to those who are in need.
Amen.

Prayers of intercession

Written by Peter Fearn

Let us pray together.

Lord Jesus, walk with us this day and let us know your presence.

We pray that hearts which know no peace may know your peace, hearts which have no hope may be filled with your hope and hearts that despair may burn with the fire of your love. We place into your hands our families and loved ones, especially those who are elderly or sick, anxious or lonely. You know their needs and we ask you to be close to them.

We place into your hands the people in our medical and emergency services and their families. We pray for the key workers whose day to day work protects and sustains us. We give thanks for them and ask you to uphold them in their health, strength and courage.

We place into your hands those in leadership and governance in these difficult days. We ask you to give them the wisdom to listen and to lead and the vision to act unselfishly for the common good.

We pray for ourselves as a society. Now more than ever we recognise our dependence on each other. Teach us how to grow in solidarity, in gratitude and in care for one another. We give thanks for our church, for David, the deacons and all from our congregation who by their actions are continuing to make known the love of Jesus Christ by word and deed.

Lord, you have loved each of us into life and counted every hair on our heads. We place into your hands those who have died. Stay with us in our sorrow and give us hope. In a period of quiet we individually pray for those we are aware of in our own hearts who are in need of your loving presence in their lives at this time.

Lord God, we pray in the name of Jesus Christ who reigns in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever.

Amen

Hymn (BPW 84)

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
forgive our foolish ways;
re clothe us in our rightful mind;
in purer lives thy service find,
in deeper reverence, praise.

In simple trust like theirs who heard,
beside the Syrian sea,
the gracious calling of the Lord,
let us, like them, without a word
rise up and follow thee.

O sabbath rest by Galilee!
O calm of hills above,
where Jesus knelt to share with thee
the silence of eternity,
interpreted by love!

Drop thy still dews of quietness,
till all our strivings cease;
take from our souls the strain and stress,
and let our ordered lives confess
the beauty of thy peace.

Breathe through the hearts of our desire
thy coolness and thy balm;
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
speak through the earthquake, wind and fire,
O still small voice of calm.

Readings

Acts 2: 42 - 47

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

John 10: 1 - 10

'Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. 2 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.

5 But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognise a stranger's voice.' 6 Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

7 Therefore Jesus said again, 'Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. 9 I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.[a] They will come in and go out, and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

And now loving Lord, as these words have been prepared and recorded earlier this week we pray that by the power of your Holy Spirit we may hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, leading us on a good path. Amen

Sermon

Tuning the heart in a noisy world

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

How do we discern what is a good way to go, what is a good way to be? We have a plethora of advice and opinion assaulting us, and it can be very difficult to hear the still small voice of wisdom.

From outside: TV, radio, friends, family, social media and general social pressures and expectations bombard us day and night. But the really tricky thing is to deal with the swirling thoughts and feelings within us. The external noise feeds into the internal noise and we can be very muddled about how to set a good, wise course through life.

Dog owners will know that their pets can recognise their voices, understanding some words, and interpreting a tone of voice. Sheep, too, can recognise the voice of their shepherd. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and his followers are like sheep who have learnt how to tune in to his particular voice.

And so part of being a Christian is to recognise the voice of Jesus even when many other voices are speaking. There are many tools and methods to help us do that, including: reflecting on the scriptures; listening to sermons; praying in silence; and talking to a spiritual friend.

John 10 talks about the Shepherd coming into the sheep pen through the proper gate, and the sheep then listen to the familiar voice of the legitimate shepherd. They learn to recognise that voice, and distinguish it from other voices.

Jesus declares in verse 7 that he is the gate. The sheep who go out and come in through him find pasture.

Verse 10 is the climax of our reading. Someone called the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. Jesus came that they may have life, and have it to the full.

Who is this thief? Let's explore three ways of thinking about it...

Some might say that the thief is the devil and leave it at that. This view sees evil as an external personal being, able to worm its way into our lives to wreak havoc. People may find devil-talk like this helpful. But it can be a way of evading responsibility for ourselves and our actions, as if someone might say, it wasn't me who committed adultery; it was the devil leading me astray...

The best devil-talk in the Bible might be that of James 4:7: Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. We are not relieved of our responsibilities by blaming a devil. We submit ourselves to God - and that's where the power lies.

Secondly, John's first readers might have understood the thief to represent the Jewish authorities, maybe a particular synagogue ruler in Asia Minor, who was throwing Jews who believed in Jesus out of the synagogue. Read this way, John 10:10 is essentially reassuring Jews who had followed Jesus that they had made the correct choice of religion. Put crudely, and in a way no sensitive Christian would today, the message was: Christianity is right; Judaism is wrong; even Christianity brings life to the full, whereas Judaism steals, kills and destroys that life.

If we were to apply this today, to hear the Shepherd's voice would involve being steeped in Christian life and culture, and avoiding all different voices such as other religions or philosophies. It would lead to a very sectarian form of religion, with Christians hiding from the world in their little holy churches.

But there's a third way of talking about this Thief. To grasp this text more deeply is to realise that the thief is not some malevolent external force waiting to catch us out; the thief is not other worldviews or different people. On this reading, the thief is inside your own head. The thief is you, or part of you.

The thief only comes to steal, kill and destroy... It's our own attitudes that steal away our joy. It's our own thinking that kills off creativity. It's our own mental habits that destroy a consideration of new opportunities. Jesus offers life; fullness of life; abundant life!

In this way John 10:10 is a powerful verse for discernment. At a personal level, it's a tool for reflection. What, in my life, is robbing me of joy? What, in my life, feels as if it is killing me? What spoils the hope in a new day? If we pray about these things honestly and deeply, waiting on God with a heart dedicated to him, it may lead to some significant changes in the course of our lives.

Read this way, John 10:10 invites us not to blame the devil or the Muslims or the immigrants or the gay people or the transgender activists or the Tories or the socialists or the wife. It invites us to look honestly into our own heart and discern: What is giving me abundant life? What robs me of that life? This is a personal way to tune our hearts to the voice of the Good Shepherd.

But this verse is really a plural verse: We might say, I have come that you-all may have life and have it to the full. After all, abundant life is surely a shared commodity; a community.

Do we get a glimpse of that in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles? It's perhaps an idealised portrait painted after the event by Luke, but it shows a community life I'd like to belong to, wouldn't you? They have fellowship - that's religious talk for hanging out. They devote themselves to the apostles' teaching - well maybe this suggests a group talking about the big ideas of faith and trying to apply them to their lives.

Miracles were happening. There was a sense of unity. A sharing of their possessions, and raising money for needy people along the lines of a first century charity edition of Cash in the Attic. They went down to the Temple; and they shared communion in each other's homes. There was a great sense of gladness and sincerity about them as they sang their praises to God. People loved them and more and more flocked to join them.

What are we to do with a text like this? Even within the narrative of Acts, this beautiful fellowship does not last long as pressures come from outside the church and doctrine is wrangled over within it.

Is this a complete description of a viable church life? It has teaching, fellowship, worship, prayer and offerings. What does it lack? Dedicated buildings, a constitution, deacons, accounts etc. From my perspective it has all the sexy bits and none of the boring parts!

Joking aside, we do need those 'boring' parts, as the continuing story in Acts makes plain. Without some structures, the winsome loose fellowship sketched out here would be hard to sustain.

For us, during this time of lockdown, meeting without buildings, we have a chance to learn what we really do love about church. We are in a strange phase of church life. With much we took for granted being put on hold. We wait, powerless, between the old and the new.

I know many of us can't wait to get back to our buildings. But, like seeds sprouting in a secret and dark place, new life is growing. We value one another so very much. In some cases, new relationships are being formed and we realise that, stripped of our buildings and our Sunday morning routines, love is thriving. I hope that the expression of that love in future times won't be tied to exchanging a few words on a Sunday morning. I hope that the web of love that is binding us close right now, a web formed of phone calls and whatsapp groups and FaceBook posts will continue and develop into parties and coffee dates and community action and dinner nights.

We realise that, as well as housing a live worship service, buildings can restrict us. I know several more people are engaging with our services because they don't have to get themselves into our building on a Sunday morning. No building has led to a larger congregation. Our whatsapp Bible study group includes many who were not previously able to join us, including one in Australia. Ministry, study and worship can't be so building-focused in the future.

In fact, the building is the elephant in the room right now! (That's quite hard to picture, isn't it?) Those old buildings from the 1920s - the community buildings - to whom do they belong? Well legally they might be ours, held in Trust by the Heart of England Baptist Association. But when did you last attend a session upstairs in the community rooms? In a real sense those rooms belong to the community around us. They belong to the uniformed groups, to Alcoholics Anonymous, to the Alzheimer's Group and many others.

In the new normal coming after the pandemic, how will we feel about these buildings? We may want to find creative ways of working with the community as we consider the future of our site.

When those people in the Acts of the Apostles gathered in each others' homes to break bread, share resources and worship, what religion were they? How would they have described themselves? We might think of them as Christians, but the word 'Christian' had not even been coined.

They were Jews, and most probably they regarded themselves as Jews for the rest of their earthly days. They were Jews who had discovered the long-awaited Messiah.

But at that point they weren't remotely interested in religious buildings and labels. What they had discovered was life, life in all its fullness, and that life bubbled up regardless of buildings and rituals and religions.

So this is the deeper reading of John 10:10. A sense that, underneath all human disagreements about politics and religion, there is the potential for rich, community living. In our current liminal space between the going and the coming, the old and the new, we are tasting that fullness of life in deeper ways.

Are we not crossing a rubicon as we travel through this in-between shadowy place? To be faithful to Jesus will be to spot where fullness of life is happening and to join in, sharing it, supporting it...It's to have courage to leave behind the old ways of clinging to particular religious forms and to be curious, experimental, joyous, relational, engaged, learning, teaching, celebrating, lamenting, protesting, encouraging, singing and dancing,

Perhaps the voice of the Good Shepherd isn't always still or small. Perhaps it's sometimes the shout of a dancer stamping her foot; the squeal of a child running for a long-denied cuddle with grandma; the roar of the home crowd welcoming their team onto the pitch after months of lockdown; the sigh of lovers reuniting; a pair of guitarists singing Streets of London in the Nursery Tavern; the sound of toddlers singing out of tune in our community rooms; the booming voice of the preacher at last returning home.

The voice of the Good Shepherd leads us to loving community, to the struggle for justice, especially for the poor; to truth shared in honest and earnest conversations; to peace experienced not as the absence of noise but the presence of things such as Christians and Muslims finding common cause in campaigning for an end to homelessness.

So how do we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd above all the background noise? Not just in the silent offering of the heart, but also in the raucous celebration of shared humanity

after weeks of necessary separation. Listen? Can you hear the loud song of the Good Shepherd as he walks through the empty streets of our city, reminding us of what we always knew in our bones: in the end all that matters is love?

Hymn (BPW 521)

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
be all else but nothing, except what thou art;
be thou my best thought in the day and the night,
both waking and sleeping, the presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word;
be thou ever with me, and I with thee Lord;
be thou my great Father, and I thy true child;
be thou in me dwelling, and I with thee one.

Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight;
be thou my whole armour, be thou my true might;
be thou my soul's shelter, be thou my strong tower;
O raise thou me heavenward, great power of my power.

Be thou my true riches, not earth's empty praise;
be thou mine inheritance, now and always;
be thou and thou only the first in my heart;
O Sovereign of heaven, my treasure thou art.

High King of heaven, thou heaven's bright sun,
O grant me its joys after victory is won;
great heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
still be thou my vision, O ruler of all.

The Grace

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ;
the love of God;
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all
now and always. Amen.

Sung blessing

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you
wherever he may send you;
may he guide you through the wilderness,
protect you through the storm;
may he bring you home rejoicing
at the wonders he has shown you;
may he bring you home rejoicing
once again into our doors.

Tuning the Heart - Bible background notes

John 10:1-10

John's gospel was probably published in several different editions before reaching its final form some time at the end of the first century. The text mentions a *disciple whom Jesus loved*, and 21:24 tells us that this is the disciple who wrote these things down. Some believe, then, that the gospel was indeed written by the disciple John, a character in the text. Well of course, many modern scholars question that, and would regard chapter 21 as a later addition. That's partly because the end of chapter 20 sounds like a conclusion, and the beginning of chapter 21 reads like the introduction to an appendix. Have a quick look if you don't believe me.

Rooted in reliable traditions about Jesus, the gospel seems to be shaped by a need to distinguish Christianity from Judaism, and there are some sharp criticisms of 'The Jews' - even though Jesus and his disciples were themselves Jews, of course. Our present passage may reflect this theme. It's a parable addressed to the Pharisees in verse 1, and concerns itself with strangers, thieves, robbers, hired hands and wolves - all enemies of the sheep, though some of them seem like friends. The parable is in part a criticism of the synagogues at the end of the first century, perhaps in Ephesus, where it's thought that those who believed in Jesus might have been ejected from Jewish fellowship.

In using the language of shepherd and sheep to describe the relationship between God and his people, the gospel echoes some well known Hebrew texts. Isaiah 40:11 tells us that *The Lord, tends his flock like a shepherd:*

*he gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young.*

And of course we have the very well-known shepherd Psalm:

*The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
he refreshes my soul.*

But although these texts were popular in Jesus day, actual shepherds at the time of the 1st Century did not have a great reputation. They were regarded as working in a low profession, and, being away at night, were unable to protect their women-folk, and so came to be regarded as morally suspect. They would be considered along with thieves, because they might let their sheep graze on someone else's property.

And yet Jesus is called the Good Shepherd. What would be an equivalent today? Maybe, the Lord is my night-shift shelf-stacker who ensures there's food for me to buy in the morning. The Lord is my care worker, who comforts me when I am old and confused in the night.

John 10: 1 - 10 uses two closely-connected images to talk about Jesus. In verses 1 - 7, Jesus is talking of a shepherd who enters the sheepfold by the gate. Our lectionary reading

concludes at verse 10, but in verse 11 we read that Jesus himself is the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep. Jesus seems to be the **shepherd** in verses 1 - 5.

Meanwhile in verses 7 - 10, Jesus says he is himself the **gate** through which a shepherd leads sheep into safety and out to pasture. The sheep know the voice of the shepherd, and he leads them to good pasture. Jesus is like the Lord in the shepherd Psalm, Psalm 23.

So, is Jesus the Shepherd, or the Gate? Confused? Well, so were the Pharisees in verse 6: *Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.* Taken together we learn that Jesus is the way into abundant life (the Gate) and a continued relationship with him is the essence of that abundant life (the Shepherd).

So I just snuck back in that word **abundant**, used in traditional translations of that iconic verse, John 10:10, the conclusion of the gospel reading today:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

Life to the full. Abundant life! The life people long for! Our text says Jesus is both the way into that abundant life, and walking with him as our guide is essential for it.

But the thief comes to steal, kill or destroy. This may have been understood as a blast against religious rivals, the non-Christian Jews, in Ephesus or wherever this gospel was first read. Religion is a terrible force, and is certainly capable of destroying, killing and stealing, as viewers of many well-known films might know.

We need to take care in applying this passage in our multicultural world today. It's probably right that the first hearers of this gospel might have read it as an assurance that they have chosen the right religion, Christianity, as opposed to the wrong one, Judaism. Perhaps they had experienced some persecution for their belief in Jesus, and needed some reassurance that they were in the right camp, the Christian one.

For the 21st century world, we must attempt to read verses like John 10:10 sensitively. Perhaps it's best read as a very simple test of all spirituality, rather than an exclusive claim for one religious tradition. Genuine spirituality leads to abundant living; phony spirituality leads to theft and death and destruction.

All religions can lead to a phony spirituality - a sense of isolation, smallness of spirit and denial of life. True spirituality exults in a joyful engagement with all dimensions of life. It is not fearful or defensive, but curious and open and loving.

Acts 2:42-47

We learnt last week that the Acts of the Apostles is the second in a two volume work by Luke, Luke-Acts. And again, we know that Luke was not present during the events described in Acts chapter 2, and our text today paints an idealistic portrait of blissful church life. It's echoed in a very similar description at the end of chapter 4, where we are told specifically that one man, Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, sold a field and gave the proceeds to the apostles. Was this the exception or the rule? Perhaps it was an unusually generous act, and Joseph is given the nickname Barnabas, meaning son of encouragement.

In any case, Luke's description of what we might now call church life is illuminating and challenging. They listen to teaching, break bread and pray. They are filled with a sense of awe at the amazing things being done by the apostles. They spend a lot of time together. They share their possessions. They sell excess goods to provide for the poor. They meet, not in a special building, but in the temple courts. In their homes they ate together and praised God and were regarded with favour by the people around them. And every day, more people joined them.

It's a picture of a grassroots community movement. There was little institution and no building. Theophilus, to whom this book is dedicated, learns as a non-Jew that the Jesus people are filled with joy and wonder. They love each other in such a way that it even unlocks the way the insecure human heart naturally clings to wealth; so they spend their money, not on fancy things, but on caring for the needy.

Is this a passage about people changing their religion from Judaism to Christianity? It might have been read that way when circulated among Christian gatherings toward the end of the first century. But if we try to imagine the original, actual events, I guess participants in the story would not have seen things that way. The three thousand baptised and the extras coming into the fellowship every day were not signing up to a new religion. They were Jews who had found their Messiah and were taking part in an informal and happy way of responding to a deeper understanding and a richer experience of the ways of the God they had always worshipped as Jews. At this stage in Luke's narrative, they expected to continue as Jews.

So we look in this text for lessons not about how to get the details and names of religion right, but for lessons on how to live as a community of people filled and empowered with joy and hope and sense of the love of God within each one of them and among them all.