

We continue this week in our series on the 7 I AM statements of Jesus. So why are we studying these – well Culture all around us has a view on who Jesus was – they think of him as a prophet, as a nice guy, someone who fought for a cause that ultimately led to his death, and in many cases people actually haven't really thought or frankly care who Jesus is. Having a very clear view on Jesus in our hearts, not just what our heads say, dramatically affects what we share as life transforming to others around us. So we need to allow Jesus to tell us who he is rather than create our own picture of who we think he is. No better place than to start with his I AM statements. So let's dive right into the passage this morning. David very kindly has produced sheets which provide you with the reading for today to follow.

I know that we have read from John Chapter 10 today, but actually in order to understand how Jesus is the gate, we need to have a grasp of Chapter 9 first. So here's a summary for us this morning. Jesus has made a very profound statement that he is the I AM from the I AM. That's a very serious claim with serious implications for his safety and wellbeing. Because the Hebrew people know that the I AM is God, who they and their ancestors have worshipped for generations. So for Jesus to say in Chapter 8, "before Abraham was, I AM", that's really going to send the cat amongst the pigeons. But it doesn't fizzle Jesus – he knows where his destiny lies, he knows that many will reject him. So now in chapter 9 Jesus is walking towards Jerusalem and he encounters a man who is blind. So he spits on the ground, makes some mud from the dirt, and puts it on the man's eyes. He tells him to wash it off in the pool of Siloam. The pharisees are not happy because this healing has been done on the Sabbath. They don't like their laws being abused. They had taken all the laws and expanded them to the point that you couldn't breathe without adhering to practices that they had concocted. So the pharisees investigate the healing, and even with all the questions, the man who is now healed says, "look I don't know about these questions you are giving me, but one thing I do know. I was once blind. Now I can see". This winds the Pharisees so much that they kick him out of the synagogue. He was rejected before as blind, and even after a miraculous healing, the religious ones reject him again.

The Pharisees don't realise it, but a man who has been blind by birth has not only received sight, but he also now sees Jesus. But for Jesus, the Pharisees who portray all wisdom and understanding are actually the blind ones. And so it's into this context that we reach Chapter 10. What we are about to see is Jesus taking a position that things are changing. No longer should a group of people's views dominate what God is wanting to do in his people. The idea that this group of religious rule-makers are in charge is over – they need to either get their facts straight or else get out of the way for the true Kingdom of God that's coming through Jesus. And Jesus is so upset about what condemnation the Pharisees have placed on this man, he speaks to them – Chapter 10.

As we read this passage about gates and pens, I wonder how many of us truly understand farming. I can remember in the first couple of weeks of being in the parish, Errol & Jeannie (Lynd) took Alison, me and the boys for a walk up the fields with the sheep. But that's it – I don't know anything else about sheep or how to look after them. You see I was brought up in a big town. I've lived as a towny for many years in the country, but I've no knowledge of what it takes to farm other than know its extremely taxing. Contrast that with the first century people who would have totally understood it. In the Hebrew world you would have had shepherds walking around a lot, with their sheep following him. Now shepherds weren't the cleanest – if you spend a lot of time around animals then you're going to smell. These shepherds would often have to stay up all night looking after the sheep so they didn't really care too much about their appearance.

So into this community, you would very often have shepherds coming together at night with their own sheep, putting them into a sheltered area on the side of a mountain or something like that. And in the mix of shepherds, they would typically have a teenage boy who would be given the job of watching the gate or the entrance to the sheep. He would normally lie across the entrance so that no sheep could get past, nor could anyone come in. That was their responsibility. Then in the morning the Shepherds would come in, and they each would have a whistle or sound that all their sheep would recognise. And those sheep would follow the shepherd through the gate to wherever he was going that day.

And so Jesus in the context of seeing how the Pharisees are wrongly leading the people with all their laws, and their criticisms of what to do and when to do it, he comes in with a familiar picture of the Sheep and the Shepherd, telling them in verse 1 of our reading 'Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber'. Jesus knows that people need the right leader.

We all need to have the right leader in this life.

How good are you are being led and instructed? I think many of us are more content when we feel in control of our own destiny, but how often do we need to have a bit of humility and acknowledge that we need to be guided. I am a terrible one for using the SATNAV in the car even when I know where I am going. Alison gets very annoyed and switches it off. Then she becomes my SATNAV. But that's laziness on my part. Although in some aspects of life it is good to acknowledge when you don't know the direction to take, so having the guide is important.

Jesus knows we need a leader, but he knows how easily we can follow the wrong direction in life. And Jesus had in mind two different types of leader in his day – he knew what they were like. He refers to thieves and robbers. He knows that the only way to enter legitimately into the sheep pen was through the gate, and so if you are entering any other way then you're up to no good. So the question today for us is who is our lead? The Bible gave examples of great leaders like Moses and David – yes they had problems but they were considered as good shepherds. But the so called shepherds of Jesus' day – the pharisees - were not considered as good. They were trying to steal the focus of what individuals should have towards God – and Jesus is saying, look these are the guys who are going about different ways to steal people away from the shepherd. Jesus was saying that he had come to show his sheep the right direction and way. Let's read verse 3, "the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice".

One of the things that we need to be so aware of folks, is that Jesus knows it's easy to follow the wrong voice in life. There are so many things in life that will try to make us think it's good advice, but its complete rubbish really compared to the voice of God. If we don't go through the gate of Jesus then we're lost. We can't have other gates that we go through in life, whether an organisation we're attached to, or different beliefs that are not entirely aligned to scripture – those gates lead to nowhere.

Sometimes we follow down different paths, but Jesus doesn't forget about us and move on. He wants to direct us through the only gate that matters. Look at this man born blind. The

Pharisees tell him (8:34) that he's no longer welcome and throw him out. I love that Jesus goes and finds him when others reject him. For many of us we can see ourselves or others in this story. Something has happened in ours or a person's life, they've made the wrong decisions, or things have happened that they have no control of, or maybe they've stood for something that was right, but their family or friends cut them off. There's an emptiness in those situations isn't there? But isn't it incredibly heart-warming though that Jesus steps in and pursues that man and says, you might be kicked out by some, but I don't kick you out. He knows that sometimes in life some things happen and those so called friends and family distance themselves from you, but he wants us to know that he, the Shepherd, will always be there for his sheep even when they mess up. Maybe today you feel that God has abandoned you. So hear the voice of Jesus today that says everyone is welcome, you are not rejected by him. Even if you have been following the wrong direction, he wants to lead you from now on through the right gate.

Today if you have been following a different path, or maybe Jesus is not the gate in which all your thoughts and directions flow through, then listen to this. In verse 7 he says, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep". Those words 'Very Truly' is the Greek word Amen. It's the word that we say at the end of every prayer. So it means 'it is true'. So Jesus says to the pharisees at the beginning of the chapter and now in verse 7, You need to listen because what I'm saying is true. I'm the gate for these people, I'm the only true voice that needs to be followed. Not you, not your religion, not your secret organisations, not your cultural heritage, I am the gate. I am the one who lies across the entrance to ensure that anything trying to get into those sheep of mine are protected. I am the one who ensures their safety until I am ready to stand up and lead them out. I will lead them to places that are safe and prosperous. That's my job, and you don't get to tell them otherwise.

Today in Ballyclare and Ballynure we need to hear Jesus say I am the gate. We can stock pile all our good deeds, we can line up all our busy programmes in church, we can be out doing community work around our towns and villages, but if Jesus is not the gate then none of it matters. There is nothing more important folks. And if Jesus is the gate, then it doesn't matter what others may say about you. But it's so easy to listen to the wrong voice isn't it. On Wednesday night I was leading the ladies' bible study and we were talking about the lies that can be said about us that somehow we start to believe. We can hear words from our past, from our broken relationships or our mistakes that say 'you're useless, you're not loved, you've no gifts to use, you're not welcome around here' and we can very quickly believe them to be truth, when in fact those accusations are just lies from the pit of hell. But Jesus knows that he will provide all we need, he will protect us, he will restore us, he will lead us to safe pasture.

And so finally for all of us this morning, instead of being stuck in thinking that we are a nobody, we need to know that Jesus is the passage that leads us to life.

Jesus says in verse 9 and 10 that he is the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

This is such an important thing for all of us who step in and out of the mess of life to remember. We will spend the rest of our lives working out what a full abundant life looks like. But that's why Jesus has come. He has made you out of love, so that this life is a gift to you. You may have to work through a lot of mess and problems, but don't forget that he

has come that you may have life to the full. And just so you're clear he says, I'm the only way you can get that full life. Don't play with anything else.

Jesus says I'm the gate to abundant life. Imagine all those people sitting listening to this. They have heard in the pipeline about a man who was born blind and now he can see. You're in the crowd and now you hear him claim that he offers a full abundant exciting life to all. Jesus says, don't miss this point. You want life, everyone does. I'm the only way you will get it. Not some wrote form or pattern of living, not some tradition that has been handed to you for centuries that tangles you in regulation. No, me. I'm the gate and I lead to abundant life.

For many of us today, that is so important for us to hear. You've tried many things in life – but it still doesn't do it. There's something missing – it's the freedom Christ calls us to have. Just because the man had vision again, didn't mean that he had life. But once he saw Jesus verse 38 of the previous chapters says 'Then the man said, "Lord, I believe" and he worshipped him. He could see.

I think society would do well to regain its vision of seeing Jesus again. Many don't see him as a gate in which to be led through, and yet without that gate we are so open to the thief coming to steal and to destroy. What's it going to take for many today to recognise that in every decision and every thought they need to be led by the right leader. Who is governing all your thoughts today folks? When things come out of your mouth, when you make decisions, are they all being directed by the shepherd? Are you being led through him as the gate? Or do you allow your decisions to be guided more by your own reasoning. Don't allow reason to dominate over what Jesus wants. Beware because the thief comes to steal and destroy. Jesus is the promise that we have been looking for. He frees us from the darkness of sin, helping us see again. And He is the door for the sheep. He is the one way to enter into safety and life, and he keeps us safe from the thieves and robbers who want to see us fail. Start looking again to the shepherd who will protect you, giving you an abundant life, and who will lead you into green pastures.