

At the start of another year, I have been thinking about what lies ahead for us. For many on the eve of a New Year they toast the year in with friends and family wishing for a better year to come. I wonder how all of us have felt as we have entered into 2023. Are you excited for the year ahead? Are you anticipating good things? I hope that to be the case, but I would probably advise you not to pick up any newspaper or watch any news channel, because you will be guaranteed to have any life sucked out of you within minutes. It truly is depressing. We've all been through plenty in the past number of years, and now many are feeling the pain of a recession and economic turmoil. And then when you take a breath, you hear about the health crisis, the strikes, the war, the continued delay in Stormont. And then if that's not enough Harry & Meghan populate many pages of our tabloids. So where do we turn? Where does society today get any hope? I think all of this highlights that the world is totally out of control.

And yet for God's people, for those that trust in him, we in this year ahead do not need to be stuck in that place of hopelessness; because we need to declare our total confidence in God our Father. But I appreciate that it's not easy when you feel so claustrophobic with everything around you at present. So at the start of this new season, we are going to declare something different which is why I've called our new teaching series 'Promises'. Because there are things that we can hold on to, things that we can definitely rely upon. Into this New Year I want us to hold on to the promises that God will provide for us, he will satisfy us more than this world, he will give rest to those who are weary, he will strengthen those of us who are weak. Now I don't know about you this morning, but that already lifts my spirit. And that is my hope and prayer for all of you. Because these are not just aspirations or things we hope will come true; no, these are the certainties that we declare from scripture when we have that relationship with Jesus.

And so today, we start with what must be the greatest promise of Jesus from our reading, that he promises he will save us. Let me read again from verse 9 of John 10. Jesus said, "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved".

That is Jesus' promise for all who are connected with him – you are saved.

You know I can remember a number a few years back when Alison phoned me, terrified because her car had had a blow-out. She was driving on a main road at about 40 miles per hour when the tyre completely shredded. Thankfully she was able to bring the car safely to a halt, and then come on the phone to me. I made my way across to her location, gave her my car, and then I waited for the breakdown lorry to come and take the car to the garage. We've all been in situations like that, where we've either rescued someone or been rescued by someone.

But the promise that Jesus makes to save us, isn't just a one-off event when we are in trouble. It is a once and for all victory over the greatest enemy of all. It's an extraordinary claim. And so today I want you to be encouraged that God loves you so much that he is willing to put everything on the line, himself, and he promises that you and I and everyone in all of creation can know that salvation. But why does he want to save us, how does he do it, and what is it that we are saved for. Well let's unpack this incredible promise further, because I believe as we realise it, we can walk from this place today truly encouraged.

You see the reason why Jesus saves us is because he knows what we are capable of.

I am sure I've told the story before about my time of training in Dublin for the ministry, and we went on a retreat to Ambleside in Lancashire. We were in the most beautiful scenery, but in the morning as I was getting ready in my room, I could hear outside the noise of sheep bleating. It was quite a racket. When I looked out I could see all the sheep heading along the hillside in one direction, and in the distance was the farmer who was calling them for food. There was clearly a bond between him and his sheep. He knew each one, and he knew what they needed. They trusted him. If I on the other hand had went into the field and called the sheep, I think they would have looked at me, but with no response. There's a clear difference between me and the farmer. He is known, and he knows his sheep. That's what Jesus is getting at here in verse 3. Let's read, "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". In verse 14 Jesus says this, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me".

You see a shepherd spent so much time with his sheep, that he knew everything about them – he knew what they looked like, he knew where in the fields they would typically be located. And so that's what Jesus is saying. He's saying that he knows us, in fact he knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows our children better than we know them. Now that should bring incredible comfort for some of you today, whatever you may be facing, or whatever you have gone through – that when you go to Jesus he is not distant, he completely understands how you are feeling, in fact he understands the resolution to situations better than you yourself know. And in a world that is so messed up at the minute, Jesus knows how every person whether in the news, or those watching the news feel today. It is so comforting to know that. And as he calls he hopes that his sheep will hear him and come to him.

But the reason why Jesus saves is not only to bring comfort but also because he knows our deepest needs and issues. We may be able to fool others behind our pleasant masks, but Jesus knows the depths of our hearts. He knows the hurt, he knows the pain, he knows the things that we are hiding from others. He knows our flaws. You see being called a sheep is maybe not the greatest of compliments.

I remember when we lived in the countryside in Garvagh, there were mornings when we would waken and there would a sheep stuck in a hedgerow, or even having escaped out onto the road. You see sheep are stupid, they lack no sense, they panic, and get scared.

You might remember the prophet Isaiah describing us as sheep. Isaiah 53:6, 'We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way';

That's the reason why there needs to be a shepherd who protects, who provides, who saves the sheep from danger. And so Jesus knew that the analogy of sheep worked for all of us. He knows us all so well that he knows that as we foolishly go astray and turn to our own ways, that we need a Shepherd to save us from the greatest danger facing us and that is sin. Why is sin dangerous? Well again, listen to scripture; Romans 6:23 'The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord'. If we leave sin to its own devices it will destroy us, and yet God gives us a saviour in Jesus Christ.

So, if we know why he saves us, then we need to consider how he does this. We may all know the answer from our Sunday School lessons, and yet I challenge all of you today to reconnect again with the depths of this salvation.

You see the way that Jesus has done that is by laying down his life for us. If you go on to read further in this chapter about the shepherd, Jesus promises in verse 11 that he lays down his life for the sheep. In fact it's so important for us to know, that he says it not just once but 3 times in the chapter. He is willing to lay down and surrender everything for us.

You see he's not just willing to do it because it's a good thing to do, he's doing it intentionally. God has intentionally come as Immanuel, as the baby in the manger, as the young boy, as the young man, as the 30 year old whose whole life is destined for one thing and that is to die in our place. He's declaring that he would rather take all the punishment of the world – all of the hopelessness that we see ahead of our society in 2023 upon his own shoulders and make a path through it for us. Do you see the depth of that love folks? It means that Jesus will never abandon you, because he's not in it for money or the likes, but because he loves you and his flock.

To explain this further, there's a great story told in the Alpha course of 2 kids that grew up together, and as they became older, they went their separate ways. One became a lawyer, and the other got involved in bad company and became involved in crime. Years went by until one day when the guy was caught for his crimes and was brought in front of a judge to be sentenced. It was at that moment that the judge and the criminal recognised one another from their childhood. The judge however knew that his old friend had done wrong, and had to pay the penalty for his crimes, and so the judge fined him a hefty sum for his offences. At that point however, the judge took off his wig, stepped down from his podium and stood beside the criminal. Opening his cheque book, he then wrote a cheque paying the debt that the criminal owed the court. The man's debt was paid, and he was free. But in being free he realised the cost that had been paid for him, and turned his life completely around.

Folks, that is what the Good Shepherd does. He takes the pain so we don't have to – such is his love for you and me.

Which brings me on to my final point, and that is 'what is Jesus making all this effort for?'

Jesus in verse 10 tells us that "the thief (and that is Satan) comes only to steal and kill and destroys [us], but [Jesus] has come that they may have life and have it to the full".

I wonder what goes through your mind when you think of living life to the full? There are times when I am with families who have lost loved ones and they will remark that the person lived a full life. That would kind of suggest that living a full life is giving everything you've got to the time you have on this earth. In this past week I was watched a programme on BBC and the celebrity Amanda Holden was saying that now that she is over 50 she is giving everything to enjoying life, doing things that she hasn't done yet, and completing as much off her bucket list before it's too late. Is that what we think when we hear the words 'life to the full'?

You see what Jesus taught was that really living was not about the empty pursuit of things that do not last. It's not a promise that we'll be glamorous and wealthy, It's not that we'll be free from trouble or adversity. It's living a life that is fully in love with our Creator. It's the promise that we can have life fully even amidst trouble, in the knowledge that nothing we face right now, can rob us of a glorious eternity with God.

If we look at the incredible scenes of peace and perfection in the garden in Genesis and then look at the image of new creation in Revelation, we see how the fullness of life as God intends it to be are described to us. That's why the entire story of the bible is to restore things to the life that God wants all of us to enjoy. And therefore when we have that certainty of our future, it gives us an incredible freedom to live in that promise today, knowing that God has promised to lead us into good things. You know I have watched friends and others walk through incredibly hard times, but I have been so encouraged to see them seeking out the one who has secured their future, that they have gone to the one who promises life. That is life in all of its fullness. It's because they know that the shepherd is good, and they have heard his voice.

Conclusion

Folks, Jesus saves us because he knows us so intimately, he saves us by laying down his life for us, and he saves because he offers us eternal freedom from the mess all around us.

On a day such as today when we launch Alpha this evening, the question is this – do you know him? I don't mean a head knowledge, I mean do you really know him? That is what RESET has been all about – it's ensuring that we as a church family are focused on the most important things. Today I believe that for some of you, and also for many that you know in your friendship group or your families, there are people who can receive such encouragement for these times by coming to the only one who will never let them down. That is Jesus. He is life changing. His promises are real. You don't have to go through another year becoming ever more depressed with the world around us – there is a freedom when you know your future with him is secure. I'd encourage you, that it is not too late, to come or bring someone tonight to discover what life is really all about. I pray that in the weeks ahead you will know the God's promises over you that fill you with encouragement into this year ahead.