When Your Heart is Cold
John 10:22-42

We're looking at the passage from John's gospel that was read to us earlier. And I don't know if you noticed it, but John gives us a marker for when it took place. Verse 22: 'At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter.'

And the Feast of Dedication is what we know as Hanukkah - celebrated in our December. And as a feast it remembers the time back in 164BC when the Temple in Jerusalem was restored and rededicated and reconsecrated to God after Antiochus Epiphanes IV, king of the Seleucid empire, had desecrated it.

But look again at what John says of the time, 'It was winter.'

How much do the seasons affect your mood? Does living under the cloud and not seeing the sun for days get you down? Do the dark, cold mornings, and long nights leave you feeling dark, longing for the warmth and sunshine of spring?

Well, read through John's gospel and you'll notice that he uses time markers like this to tell us something deeper. Judas leaves the Upper Room to go and betray Jesus. And John tells us, 'it was night.' Because spiritual darkness is afoot.

Well here it's winter, and there's a spiritual chill in the air. In A Christmas Carol, which maybe some of you read or watched over Christmas, Dickens describes the day we encounter Ebenezer Scrooge as being 'cold, bleak, biting weather.' But the weather outside is nothing, he tells us, compared to 'the cold within [Scrooge, which] froze his old features.'

And here, it's not just the season that's cold, it's people's hearts. I wonder if you know what that feels like. For Su and me, the holiday period just gone was filled with joy and laughter, but it was also filled with sadness and heartache. But if you had to choose between those extremes, which would you rather have? Spring and summer-time on the inside, when you're experiencing the emotional, relational, psychological equivalent of flowers blooming and birds singing, or the coldness and hardness and frostiness of winter? All of us would choose summer, wouldn't we? Even the most dour amongst us.

And yet the truth is all of us can also experience something like a winter of heart - when the temperature of our heart, of our joy, and peace and hope, is heading for the minus numbers. And that can be for multiple different reasons. But today's passage shows us two - unbelief and fear. And the answer to both is faith. So we're going to look at three things: Cold Hearts. Fearful Hearts. And believing hearts.

Cold Hearts
Look at v24, 'The Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." And when John talks about 'the Jews', he typically means the religious leaders. The ruling elite. And they're asking Jesus to give it to them straight. Is he the messiah, or isn't he?

Now, when you ask a question, why do you ask it? Maybe because you genuinely don't know the answer and you want to find out - like, 'Where are you from?' Or, you might ask it because you want to confirm what you already think to be the case like 'Are you from America?' Or you might ask it because you want to use it as evidence against them - like 'You're Dutch, aren't you?'

But why are these leaders asking Jesus this question? Well, firstly because they think Jesus has been playing with them; keeping them in suspense; not being straight.

But is the problem that Jesus has *not* been clear? That they've not had enough evidence?

You see, it's fair to say that, to men like these religious leaders, Jesus has *not* come straight out and said "I'm the Messiah". But if they are at the top of the tree of social capital, right down at the bottom was the Samaritan woman Jesus met at the well back in chapter 4 - an outcast among outcasts. And she says she knows that the Messiah is coming, to which he says: "I who speak to you am he."

But he's never said that to these men.

Yet, think what he had told them. In the passage right before this one he has called himself the Good Shepherd. And in the Old Testament, the Book they claimed to be experts in interpreting, who was the Good Shepherd? Psalm 23, 'The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.' Ezekiel 34, 'Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep… as a shepherd seeks out his flock, so will I seek out my sheep… I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep' (v11-15).

And he has said that Moses and the rest of the Scriptures spoke about him; and that he has come from heaven and that he's is the Bread of Life, the One whose words give life. That he was the Light of the World and the great I AM.

So was the problem a lack of clarity on Jesus' part? And the answer's No. So where is the problem for these guys? It's where the problem always lies, with all of us, it's in the heart. In what we do or don't believe about God and about ourselves. Because do they *really* want to know who Jesus is? Or is the truth, and the implications of the truth for their lives, more than they want to hear? It's the second reason they ask him this question - to have something to accuse him with.

It's why Jesus replies to them, v25, "I told you, and you do not believe."

But of course, it's not just Jesus words but his works that tell them who he is. Verse 25, "The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me." So what has Jesus done that they, or you and I, can see and go 'oh, that's who you are!'?

Well, he's turned water into wine as the ultimate Lord of the Feast, Master of the Banquet. And he'd told the Samaritan woman at the well everything she had ever done as the only One who could ever truly satisfy her or you. And he had healed a man who had been paralysed for 38 years as the One who restores all that is broken. And he'd fed a multitude of 5000 people as the true Moses and the ultimate bread from heaven. And he had walked on water as Lord of creation and given sight to a man born blind as the Light of the world. As the One who can shine in your darkness and give you sight.

And as John makes clear at the end of this gospel, those are just a selection of the multiple wonders Jesus had done that John could have told us about. But each one, Jesus is saying, was a revelation of God the Father's will and a display of God the Father's power. It's why he says in v30, "I and the Father are one".

Now, if these leaders really had any doubt before about what Jesus was claiming for himself, that last comment has blown those doubts away, and John tells us they pick up stones to stone him for blasphemy, to which Jesus responds, v32, "I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?"

And so by his words and his works, Jesus has made it clear who he is. Is he the Messiah, the King come to establish his kingdom and conquer his enemies and rule in righteousness? You bet he is. And yet, he is way, way more than that.

But do their hearts thrill at the thought of that? No. It's like the winter of unbelief has encased them in ice. Why? Because for them there is an unbridgeable chasm between God and man, between the nature of the uncreated Creator and that of his creatures. But here is Jesus, a mere man, claiming to be from the other side of that divide. Verse 33, 'The Jews answered him, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God."'

But what if God were to cross that divide? What if he were to enter our world? What if he were to come, as he said through Ezekiel he would come, as a shepherd seeking his sheep?

You see, if you're not yet a Christian, the major reason your heart may feel spiritually closed and cold is that it's not yet dawned on you who Jesus is. And if you are a Christian, one reason your heart can feel cold is that you've forgotten who Jesus is, and why he's come.

You see, they are accusing Jesus of making himself God. But from the start of this gospel, John has been clear that Jesus has not *made* himself God, he is God. Chapter 1:1: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' So it's not that Jesus, a man, has made himself God. It's that he, God, has made himself man. And the sunrise from on high has visited us. And the summer of heaven has broken into the winter of our world. To seek you out like a shepherd seeks his sheep.

And so Jesus does not respond to their accusation by saying, 'no, no, you've got it all wrong, I'm not claiming to be God at all'. He sends them back to the Bible. Verse 34, '"Is it not written in your Law, 'I said you are gods'? If he called them gods to whom the word of God came - and Scripture cannot be broken - do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?

And Jesus is quoting there from Psalm 82. And there's debate as to who God is addressing in that psalm. Is it Israel as a whole, or the leaders and judges of Israel in particular? In many ways, it doesn't matter. What matters is that God addresses those who are not God and says, v6, 'I said to you, "You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you."' And Jesus's point is, if God calls people who are not God *gods*, and his sons, why are you criticising me - the One who for all eternity past God has consecrated and set apart, begotten, for saying I'm his Son?

But again, he doesn't just leave them with his words. I mean, when a new president or prime minister takes office, or a new CEO or team manager takes control, they might say something like, 'judge me on my results.' But Jesus has a proven track record of results that tell them who he is. Verses 37-38: "If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them,

even though you do not believe *me*, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father."

But they're in no mood to believe, and v39, 'Again they sought to arrest him.'

Now you may not want to arrest Jesus, let alone stone him, but what if your heart is cold towards him/ What if it is like winter? Could it be that like them, unbelief, or forgetfulness, has a grip of your heart? Or like them, the implications of Jesus being the true king over your life are ones you don't want to contemplate?

In CS Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the White Witch, gives Edmond, one of the Pevensie boys, what he wants - some Turkish Delight. But in so doing she ensnares him in her kingdom of ice and death.

And sin - thinking or living like you're the king or queen of your universe - does the same. It tells you, 'put yourself at the centre and it's going to be summer' and all the while the cold fingers of pride and self-centredness wrap themselves around your heart. In CS Lewis' words, it's always winter, but never Christmas.

Instead, Jesus is saying, hear my words, see my works, understand who I am, with all the implications of that, and let the thaw begin.

But there is another reason why our hearts can feel cold, and that's fear.

Fearful Hearts

You see, when you're fearful or anxious about the future, or you can't see your way through what you're currently facing, or you're facing something and you wonder whether your faith will hold, it can feel like the wintry clouds are rolling in and the temperature of your heart is dropping.

So look what Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, says of his sheep, v28-29, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand."

In other words, when you believe Jesus is who he says he is, and his works testify he is, and when he's your Shepherd, you cannot be safer. You are eternally safe. And as Tom showed us last week, that eternal life Jesus speaks of is not something that begins when you die, but that starts right here and now.

And we can look for our security, or sense of wellbeing, in stuff, in relationships, in our health, or our healthy finances. But the truth is, all of those can change, and that leaves us vulnerable. And Jesus is saying you are not wrong to want that certainty, or security, or deep inner joy and peace - and you *can* know it. By knowing he holds you, and the Father holds you. And no grip is stronger than his.

Now going back a few years, one of our youth leaders was Jeremiah Johnson. And some of you will remember Jeremiah. And he was massive. Just one of his biceps was the size of my chest. And a youth retreat would not be a youth retreat without someone challenging Jeremiah to an arm wrestle. And he was like a cat playing with a mouse. He would let these spindly looking youths to get within

a centimetre of thinking they had him, before splatting them on the table. There was only ever one winner. But Jesus is saying that however massive someone's biceps, however huge their upper-body strength is, no one can out arm-wrestle him for you. He and the Father win every time, and you're the prize.

And your fears for the future, or the circumstances you're currently facing, or the doubts that you have, or the anxiety you experience, or the powers, human or demonic, that stand against you, are robbers and bandits closing in for the kill. And you're right - in your own strength, left to your own resources, you do not stand a chance. But listen, you are not left to your own resources, and you're not abandoned in a battle to fight in your own strength.

You are guarded by One whose strength is infinite. You are kept by one whose grip is unflinching. And we have good reason to doubt our own ability to hold on, but zero reason to doubt his. As Jesus says in v30. "I and the Father are one."

But how can any of that become true for you? How can you go from unbelief to belief, or from fear to faith? How can a heart that's cold or fearful grow warm with faith, hope and love?

Believing Hearts
Look at the reason Jesus gives for why these leaders are not believing in him: v26, "You do not believe because you are not among my sheep." But of his sheep he says, v29, "My Father… has given them to me."

And you can read that and think, 'so these leaders are stuffed. Jesus is criticising them for not believing in him, but they *can't* believe in him, because God hasn't given them to Jesus.' This is God's sovereignty in salvation, this is divine election, this is God *choosing* who will believe, and they're clearly not chosen. So he can hardly blame them. Their hearts are cold because God has not shone the warm rays of his light on them.

And you'd be right - but you'd also be wrong. Because God is sovereign over salvation just as he is sovereign over everything. As Jesus said back in chapter 6, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (6:44). But God's sovereignty is only one side of the coin, turn it and you'll see that on the other is the stamp of human responsibility.

Verse 27, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." So what sets his sheep apart from those who aren't his sheep? This simple willingness to hear his voice and follow him. To trust him and obey him. So how can you know that he's your shepherd and you're among his sheep? By daily trusting and obeying. By daily hearing his word and following him.

And it's as you daily put your trust in what Jesus says about himself, and what he says about you, that you will find your heart being warmed. And you'll experience what he says in v26, that "I know them" - and you'll know that he knows you better than you know yourself.

You see, John tells us that Jesus leaves Jerusalem, heads back across the Jordan and v41, 'And many came to him.' And v42, 'And many believed in him there.' And these weren't the religious elite, these were just normal folk. Which means they probably couldn't have squared divine sovereignty and human responsibility any better than you or me. But what they could do, and what

they did do, is come to him and believe in him. And you and I can do the same, and it makes all the difference in the world.

On Christmas Eve, before all our kids arrived, Su and I took ourselves off to All Saints in Vevey for their midnight communion service. And as we sang, and walked through the liturgy, and listened to Mark, the minister, preach on Christ the light in the darkness, it just dawned on me again. This is all true. In Christ, God really has broken into our dark and cold world. And I would not have said my heart was cold, but that night it was warmed, as I believed.

And as we went forward for communion, those words - 'the body of Christ broken for you, the blood of Christ shed for you', were like sunbeams of encouragement.

And they can be for you too. You see, if you feel the coldness of fear or anxiety steeling over your heart, hear Jesus speaking to you, even as we take communion in a moment. This is my body, broken for you. This is my blood, shed for you. And know, that he who gave himself up for you, will not give you up for anything. And as you take the bread in your hand know that no one can take you out of his.

You see, he too was was surrounded by enemies, baying for his blood. And at the cross these leaders, and others like them, got what they wanted. But it was there, in his seeming defeat, as he bore our sins, that he conquered. It was in his seeming to be beaten that he became the champion. And in dying and rising again, he has defeated your greatest enemies of sin and death, and whatever else you most dread. And now nothing can take you from his grip, and nothing can separate you from his love.

And if you're not yet a Christian, now is a great time to change that. Hear his voice calling you to come. And come. Let the light of the truth of who he is, and what he's done for you, soften and warm your heart. Come in repentance and come in faith. Hear and follow, trust and obey.