It has to be admitted that these verses at the beginning of John chapter 10 are not the easiest to follow. What on earth is Jesus on about?

Well at least we’re not alone. As John tells us in verse 6, even those listening at the time ‘did not understand what he was saying to them’. So maybe we can be forgiven for finding what Jesus says hard to grasp. But then by the time we get to verse 10, we’re on firmer ground. Jesus is spelling it out very clearly. He’s talking about the transformation that he brings to our lives. ‘The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.’

Now as so often with confusing passages in the Bible, things begin to fall into place much more easily when we look at them in their context. The background for all this comes in the previous chapter. From which it’s clear that Jesus is drawing our attention to the unmistakeable contrast between himself on the one hand and the more conventional religious leaders of his day on the other.

What’s been going on in chapter 9 is this. The religious authorities have been unable to cope with the way Jesus chooses the sabbath, God’s holy day of rest, to heal a man who had been born blind. You’re not supposed to do anything that could remotely be thought of as ‘work’ on the sabbath. But Jesus had opted for the spirit rather than the letter of the law and gone ahead. The sightless beggar who once scrabbled about by the roadside is now going round seeing for the first time in his life.

The result is that the religious authorities thrown him out. He is no longer welcome in their particular sheepfold. They can’t cope with what he tells them about how it was Jesus who healed him and so they excommunicate him. By the end of the chapter it has become very clear just who in this story is really blind - and it’s not Jesus or the man he has just healed...

We then launch straight into chapter 10 with its talk of sheep and robbers and gates and shepherds. It all becomes rather clearer, doesn’t it? Jesus must be talking about those with whom he has just had a run-in. He identifies the religious leaders of his day, those who were more concerned with form than reality, as thieves and robbers. They have their own interests in the number one spot. The needs of those they are supposed to be leading take second place. No wonder they have failed to capture the hearts of their people.

And in the middle of it all, the wonderful summary in verse 10: ‘The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.’ These are harsh words about his opponents. But the reality is that this is the effect of steering people away from knowing and experiencing the truth of how God really is: it’s to steal, to kill and to destroy.

Instead of what Jesus offers: abundant life, life to the full. That’s what we’d like, isn’t it? Here is something to look forward to, to hope for, to seek to nurture as we pray for God’s blessing on Amber, Willow and Jonah this morning. That they may enjoy an abundance of life. And with it, protection from the thief. We want the bad fairy to stay away. This is no place for the one who comes only to steal and kill and destroy. Abundant life, life to the full, is what we want here today.

I wonder what this means though. Suppose you went out on the street and conducted a survey to discover what people understood by the phrase ‘abundant life’. What do you think? Is a full life a long life? A happy life? A successful life?
How about this?

A university professor tells of being invited to speak at a military base one December and there meeting a soldier named Ralph. Ralph had been sent to meet him at the airport, and after they had introduced themselves, they headed toward the baggage claim. As they walked down the concourse, Ralph kept disappearing. Once to help an older woman whose suitcase had fallen open. Once to lift two toddlers up to where they could see Santa Claus. And again to give directions to someone who was lost. Each time he came back with a big smile on his face. “Where did you learn to do that?” the professor asked. “Do what?” said Ralph. “Where did you learn to live like that?” “Oh,” Ralph replied, “during the war, I guess.” Then he told the professor about his tour of duty in Vietnam, about how it was his job to clear mine fields, and how he watched his friends blow up before his eyes, one after another. “I learned to live between steps,” he said. “I never knew whether the next one would be my last, so I learned to get everything I could out of the moment between when I picked up my foot and when I put it down again. Every step I took was a whole new world, and I guess I’ve just been that way ever since.”

The abundance of our lives is not determined by how long we live, but how well we live it. And, according to what Jesus says here, how well we live it depends crucially on the connections there are between our lives and his. To allow anyone else, even we ourselves, to call the shots is to entrust ourselves to a thief. ‘I, and I only, came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.’

This is what we celebrate in baptism. The coming of Jesus and the possibility of any and all of us entrusting ourselves to him, of being linked up with him as the Good Shepherd. This is what we pray Amber, Willow and Jonah will grow up to discover for themselves. A life that is full because, over-arching everything else, it is linked up with Jesus Christ.

Now that sounds fine. But what does it mean in practice? What difference does being linked up with Jesus Christ make?

Well, we could do a great deal worse than glance at this morning’s first reading from the story of the early church in Acts 2. These verses have often been seen as a pattern for the life of a healthy Christian community, a community within which people are experiencing life to the full.

What we discover is how the connection with Jesus is strengthened and developed as they devote themselves (verse 42) to four key ways of getting to know him - through the teaching of the apostles, through fellowship with fellow believers, through the breaking of bread and through the prayers.

This results in the twin keynotes of gladness and generosity (verse 46) we noticed earlier in that story about Ralph, the soldier from Vietnam. As a result of which it’s little wonder that ‘day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved’.

This is the true nature of the family of God into which we have welcomed Amber, Willow and Jonah. A community in which we experience abundant life, life to the full.

And, of course, this is not just for the three of them but for all of us who belong to Christ. This is what each of us is called to as well. To develop our connection with Jesus Christ. To allow him to be our Good Shepherd. To let our lives display the gladness and generosity which flow from knowing him and being in fellowship with one another. This is what it means to live life to the full. May we do so for his glory’s sake. Amen.

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