Did you hear the one about the sweet old lady who got onto a train? She found a seat, and settled herself down. At the next stop a young man in a business suit swaggered onto the train and sat opposite her. The old lady got out a bible and started to read and meditate on its words. The young man was curious to find he’d sat next to someone who wasn’t preoccupied with a small electrical device, so he maneuvered his line of sight to find out what she was reading. Realizing it was a bible, he asked, incredulously, “Do you really believe those stories?” The old lady, without moving her head from her book, peered over her half-rimmed spectacles and said, “I most certainly do, young man.” Undeterred, the man continued. “What about that old geezer who got swallowed by a fish? How could someone survive in a fish for three days?” “You’re talking about the prophet Jonah, young man. I have no idea how that happened, but I look forward to asking Jonah about it when we meet in heaven one day.” The young man thought he’d cornered her this time. “Fair enough, but what if Jonah’s not in heaven? What if Jonah went to hell?” “Well then,” replied the old lady, smiling sweetly, “You’ll be able to ask him yourself, won’t you?”

Think for a moment about what makes this story funny. The old lady represents the way a lot of Christians feel about the church. Old, charming, behind the times, and ineffectual. But it turns out the old lady is full of surprises. Unlike many Christians, she has an uncomplicated faith in the authority of scripture. She also sees no reason to question the ultimate destiny of believers in heaven and unbelievers in hell. More than that, she has no hesitation in talking even to hostile and mocking strangers about her convictions. The young man represents the modern world – young, pushy, impatient, businesslike, with little use for historic Christianity, seeing the church as a figure of fun. The story’s funny because we assume the old lady’s weakness, and yet we see the way her simple faith in the eternal power of God exposes the bombast of the young man. If the roles were reversed, and the arrogant young businessman was full of assurance about the old lady’s destiny in the fires of hell, the story wouldn’t be funny. Quite the opposite, in fact: it would feel like the powerful man was harassing the vulnerable lady with threats and scaremongering.

Bear that in mind as we think about Peter’s words to the rulers, elders, high priests, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, weeks after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. Speaking of Jesus, Peter claims, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” What makes Peter’s statement so remarkable is that just a few weeks before his speech there was no such thing as Christianity. There was just Jesus of Nazareth and a rag-tag bunch of faltering followers. Jesus died a humiliating, agonizing, and shameful death; and it looked like another dreamer had simply come to a tragic end. But then came Jesus’ resurrection, then came his ascension, then came the coming of the Holy Spirit, and in no time here we are, only four chapters into the Acts of the Apostles, and already Peter’s making global, universal, eternal claims for the significance of Jesus. When Peter, the spokesperson for an obscure movement of retired fishermen and former tax collectors, says “There is salvation in no one else,” then he’s either so ridiculous he’s funny, or he’s so astonishing he takes your breath away.

The point is, those words sound very different coming from a person who’s making a courageous statement from a place of social nonconformity, and speaking at the risk of death, than they do from a place of wealth and security in a country like ours today. To go back to the conversation about Jonah on the train, Peter has all the subversive relish of the old lady; but a contemporary Christian voice saying the same words sounds like the bullying, swaggering, young businessman.

When Christians in America today get into the kind of conversation the old lady had on the train, the chatter tends to go in one of two directions. In option one, everything gets very dogmatic, and the lines are absolutely clear who’s saved and who isn’t, and the Jesus who died for our sins turns into a monster who seems content
to send a great many people to hell. That Jesus seems so unattractive it’s not at all clear why anyone would ever want to consider spending eternity with him. In option two, everything becomes terribly vague, and the only thing we seem to know for certain about heaven is that everyone gets there, and eternity becomes all terribly democratic and inclusive and starts to sound more and more like a mirror image of contemporary America, and the mystery is why Jesus went to all the trouble of becoming incarnate and dying an agonizing death just to tell us a bunch of things we already know and to save us from a hell that apparently never existed in the first place.

(Just in passing let me wonder why anyone is surprised that church attendance is in decline in America. If half the church is presenting a faith that makes God out to be a vindictive judge, and the other half is making God out to be an anodyne version of themselves, it’s actually amazing anyone goes to church at all.)

So what’s the mistake both halves of the church are making? The mistake concerns salvation. The tendency in a democratic society is to get into a constant battle between liberty and equality. This debate has been going on so long and so animatedly that most of us can slip into it as if we were resuming parts in play we still remember performing at high school. This is how it goes. We hear the unambiguous words, “There is salvation in no one else,” and we instantly react out of a commitment to liberty or a commitment to equality.

If we take the first course, and react out of liberty, we see that life is made up of laws, some natural, some conventional, and we have more or less complete freedom whether or not to keep those laws; but keeping or not keeping those laws has consequences, and it’s no business of anyone else, even God, to protect us from those consequences, because that would be an infringement of our liberty. Thus when Peter says, “There is salvation in no one else,” he’s uttering a law, if not of earth, then at least of heaven. If we keep that law, and follow Jesus, we find salvation; if we don’t keep that law, we miss out on salvation. Simple as that. Ignorance of the law is no excuse. That’s the attractive elegance of the view expressed by the old lady on the train.

If, by contrast, we react out of equality, we can’t countenance the idea that some might get the candy of salvation and some may not. Inequality may have some purpose or unavoidability in the short term, but when it’s painted on an eternal canvas it’s utterly unconscionable. From this perspective the case of the person who has never heard the name of Christ, or who’s been so exposed to the failures and vices of the church that they can’t possibly see the wood of Jesus for the trees of his flawed followers, becomes the cause célèbre. It seems wholly unjust, indeed absurd, to deny salvation to someone simply on the grounds of bad luck. Those committed to equality can find it terribly difficult to make any value judgments at all, and it’s quite common to hear ardent proponents of equality maintaining that all religions are of equal worth and equal truth, and even that all religions deep down are saying the same thing. Such views are unsustainable once you’ve got any kind of detailed knowledge of the diversity of the world faiths, which in many cases flatly contradict one another; but many people nonetheless proclaim them passionately out of an unwavering conviction that there’s nothing good to be said about salvation unless everyone has it.

What happens is that salvation gets gobbled up in an ongoing argument between freedom and equality. The debate very quickly ceases to be about the nature and purposes of God, and instead becomes yet another familiar battle about the source, protection, and distribution of human goods, the kind of which dominates our political lives. It’s a bit like walking in on a domestic or sibling argument and knowing that some that anything you say will simply become ammunition in a relentless and interminable quarrel that’s got nothing to do with you.

So how can we think more helpfully about salvation? I suggest by turning to the words of Jesus that we read this morning from John chapter 10. “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” This tells us more or less all we need to know about salvation. Let’s look at it carefully.

Here in John chapter 10 we discover what and who we are. We’re sheep. We’re not rational, independent individuals; we’re not entitled to anything, least of all salvation. We’re all alike, in two respects only. We’re all
equally lost; and we’re all equally loved. We’re equally lost, in that there’s no hope for us outside the sheepfold; and we’re equally loved, in that the shepherd knows each one of us by name. That’s a lot of names: that’s a lot of love.

And here we discover what and who Jesus is. Jesus is our shepherd. Jesus has no identity other than to be the one whose greatest concern is our welfare. Jesus seeks in all ways to give us abundant life and bring us into the safety of his sheepfold. He has not the remotest desire for any harm to come our way. And when harm does come our way, what does he do? He lays down his life for us. This isn’t some distant, arbitrary deity orchestrating our eternal destiny by push-button remote control: Jesus says, “I lay down my life for the sheep.” Jesus isn’t some lofty upholder of individual liberty who lets us walk into danger and leaves us alone to face the consequences. Listen to those most wonderful words you ever heard: “I lay down my life for the sheep.”

There’s no length to which Jesus will not go to bring every sheep into the eternal safety of the sheepfold.

But neither does Jesus pretend that there’s some kind of flat equality that makes no one sheep any different from any other. He’s quite straightforward about it. He says, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.” No idealistic equalization of all religions, no pretending that there’s such a thing as anonymous Christianity or that people can be regarded as Christians if they pursue other faiths or agnosticism with good will. Jesus calls it exactly what it is. There are sheep who do not belong to his fold. Don’t pretend they do. They don’t. They may of course not have heard the invitation. But they may well have heard the invitation and turned it down. They may of course have heard in such a way that made the sheepfold seem very unattractive. But they may well have had every access to the wonder of what this invitation could be and still turned it down.

We’re getting to the crucial part. As to those other sheep, that don’t belong to this fold, whether by circumstantial accident or by their own conscious design, Jesus says this: “I must bring them also.” There’s no ambiguity here: it’s clearly central to Jesus’ mission, part of his identity. He must bring them. He must. That’s not about coercing them against their will. If you’ve ever hung around sheep you’ll know that coercing one against its will isn’t really an option, even if it weren’t already contrary to the good shepherd’s heart. But it’s absolutely clear that Jesus’ mission is not complete until those other sheep find their way to the fold. Salvation isn’t something Jesus tosses our way with a shrug of the shoulders that says, “Take it or leave it.” Salvation is what the good shepherd lays down his life to make possible and continues to offer everyone, every day, in every way, however little we may ever value or understand it. Salvation, in the end, isn’t something God does for our sake, and decides on occasion not to waste on the unworthy: salvation is something God does for God’s own sake, because God has decided never to rest until we dwell in the heart of the Trinity forever.

Note that this is the moment that Jesus changes tense. He says “They will listen to my voice.” Jesus shifts from his earthly purpose in the present tense to its heavenly fulfilment in the future tense. When the veil is pulled away, when ignorance and misunderstanding and accident of history are removed, all sheep will hear Jesus’ voice. Think of what happens in the Easter garden to Mary, when Jesus calls her by name. Everything falls into place. That’s what Jesus is saying will happen to all sheep when they hear his heavenly voice. And then comes the final future statement: Jesus says, “There will be one flock, one shepherd.” That’s the joy of God’s desiring. That’s the longing of the heavenly heart. That’s the eternal destiny of all sheep: to be one flock, under one shepherd.

I said earlier it’s sometimes hard to understand why anyone goes to church at all. I hope now it’s clear. Not to ensure our salvation’s in the bag; but to realize we’re wayward, stubborn, foolish sheep, to be known by name by the shepherd and be drawn towards the sheepfold, to remember the sheep who are not of this fold, and to long for them to be gathered too. Most of all, we come to church to hear the shepherd’s voice and discover what it might mean to be one flock.

Because we shall only discover the final unity of freedom and equality, and the meaning of salvation, and the way to share one sheepfold, when we this central truth: we all have the same shepherd.