

Sermon on Sunday 30 April 2023

by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

Gospel reading: John 10. 1-10

Let's start with a bit of audience participation. I'd like each of you just to take a few seconds to imagine in your mind's eye – a gate. Any kind of gate. Just picture it to yourself.

Have you got one?

Who pictured a farm gate? That's fair enough, we've just had a reading about sheep. Who pictured a garden gate? Any other kinds of gate?

Now, hands up time again. Whose gate was open? Whose gate was shut?

The 4th Sunday of Easter is traditionally associated with Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Our reading from John's Gospel is the first of a series of discourses where Jesus speaks of his love for, and care for, his Father's sheep.

The 'Good Shepherd' passage itself comes a bit later. In John 10 verse 9 Jesus has a different message: I am the

gate. "Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture".

I am the gate. Google images, one of my favourite resources for theological research, will throw up a first scoop of 360 pictures on my laptop if I search on 'gate'.

Every kind of gate you can imagine. In 95% of those pictures, the gate is shut! Just 18 were open. I counted them, you've got to do your research thoroughly.

It's natural. 'Please close the gate' says the sign on many a country footpath, on many a garden gate. When we think of gates, we think of privacy, keeping people out, or keeping things in – usually animals and children. We think of barriers. So where does Jesus claim 'I am the gate' fit in?

Jesus was often angry with the religious leaders of his own age. They liked high walls and closed gates, and they liked to turn people away. You're not holy enough, you don't obey the Law – you don't live the right lifestyle. God won't want you. You're not faithful enough, you don't believe the right creeds, you don't worship in the right way, God won't want you. You had the wrong parents, God only likes people with the right background, people who look like us.

So here is Jesus' first challenge to them. Open the gate!

But how many of those ‘closed gate’ attitudes sneaked straight back in to the Christian Church the minute we thought Jesus’ back was turned? It is one of the tragedies of Christian history that so many followers of Christ have passed through His open gate, but have then felt themselves called to close the gate behind them and become its gatekeepers.

The image of St Peter holding the keys to the gates of heaven has become part of our cultural wallpaper, but it is a terribly unhelpful one. It’s an image of a gate that is not necessarily closed and padlocked, but where there is no entry until you’ve got past the religious security guards.

But it is the gates we keep closed down here on earth that still grieve Jesus. The gates of our long-ingrained practices of ‘proper’ worship, our closed and cosy fellowships of like-minded people, the lingering traces of old prejudices. The tragedy is that so many of those gates are no longer padlocked, no longer even on the latch, and are even falling apart on their hinges; they would open easily if they were pushed, but, somehow, we never get round to taking them away. The gate still looks like it’s there to keep out people who aren’t like us.

What is a gate really meant to be? It's not a barrier. It's a gap in the wall, a way through, an easy route to the next place, to the place you are meant to go next.

Perhaps because of that other much-loved parable about the lost sheep, we often have in our minds a picture of Jesus bringing his lost sheep into the safety of the sheep fold, the walled enclosure. But, actually, that isn't what Jesus speaks of in our Gospel reading. He speaks not of leading the sheep into the fold, but of leading them out.

In Jesus' metaphor, he is the gate, the opening, the free passage between the security of the sheepfold, and the richness of the open pasture outside. And here, perhaps, Jesus is challenging us to realise that the fold, the 'safe' place with its' sheltering walls, is not really where he wants us to be. We're not meant to stay in the fold, and Jesus offers himself as the way to new horizons, to liberation from the limits and confines of the place we feel safest.

After all, this is the same Shepherd we meet in Psalm 23, who leads us by still waters, who leads us to pastures green. Under our shepherd's watchful eye, we do not need to huddle anxiously behind the walls of the fold. That is not the redemption that Jesus promises us; the whole bounty of God's creation is out there to nourish and delight us, and Jesus tells us we are free to go out and partake.

'I am the gate' – the break in the wall, the gap in the fence. If the wall around you is hemming you in, don't worry. You don't need to start scrambling up the stonework or climbing over the wire. I am the place where you can pass through. I'm not here to make things hard for you. I'm not here to get in the way. Come and go as you please, the invitation is open. Yes, there is safety, and there is also rich pasture, and both are my gifts to you. 'I am the gate', have faith, walk through me, and discover it all.

