

## **Opening the gates**

*Acts 2:42-47; John 10:1-10*

Many years ago, when my godson had just started school, he and his five year old classmates were given the task of counting the number of doors in their homes. I rather think the primary one teacher was encouraging them to be able to count to ten. My godson lived in a 1930s art deco country house built by Sir Basil Spence. I was there the weekend he was set the task. We stopped counting when we got to one hundred.

In these days of lockdown, doorways and gateways seem to be taking on a new meaning. Many rarely venture beyond their own doorways and gates these days. Perhaps on Thursday to clap for carers and key workers and the NHS, but that's about it. At shops and supermarkets there are often staff stationed at doorways and entrances, making sure people keep a safe distance, and only a certain number of people are in the shop at any one time. It sometimes feels like we are being counted in and counted out.

One of the sad things at the church at the moment is that our doors are, necessarily, kept shut and locked. When we were involved with our various building projects one of the desires we had was that, when the building was open and in use, there would be glass doors and windows through which people could see activity. How often do churches look like fortresses built to keep people out, when in fact they should be safe and welcoming havens, designed to encourage people in. It may be some time before our doors are open again to welcome people in, but welcome them in again we will.

At the glass window of the Cluny Hall, beside the door on to Cluny Gardens, I have placed the daffodil cross on a table so anyone passing by can see that symbol of hope. The buildings may be closed for the moment, the doors may be shut, but the heart of the church, the promise of Jesus and His active love, is still present; and it is active within our community.

Jesus says of Himself, "I am the door." It is a powerful image. In His day, the gate was an opening in the ancient city, town or village wall through which almost all citizens passed daily to get to their

fields or to take care of business inside the city, they were the public spaces. Gates form boundaries between who is in and who is out. Gates mark territory, provide protection, and shut out trouble.

Gates were gathering spots, and in their shade, they served as the courtroom where people sought justice in Bible times. Gates were equalisers. In times of peace, the gate was the centre of community life. Gates also were the boundary between the living and the dead. The dead were buried beyond the gates.

And here, in this passage from John's gospel, gates and doors were there for protection. Jesus is not only the door. He is the door of the sheep. Jesus is the One Who will provide protection and safety.

These are times of danger and uncertainty. People are nervous and anxious. None knows how things are going to work out, despite the many fools in the worlds of politics and journalism who claim to know, or demand to know. Nobody knows, for sure, how, or when, things will move on. It doesn't mean people shouldn't be thinking or wondering, or even planning and hoping. But certainty is in no-one's gift. We are in the middle of this pandemic, not its end, and so the picture of Jesus as the door, as the protection, as the One Who offers safe-haven, remains important. Jesus is both shepherd and door. He leads the sheep to a safe place and at the same time provides the entrance into that safe place.

Jesus is the door, not only offering us protection, but offering us a gateway to a fuller life, an abundant life. He is not a one-time entrance or exit, with Jesus we can come and go, from protection inside, to freedom and fulfilment outside. Jesus as the door is the way through, not a way to separate. Jesus is the door through Whom we have access to bread and light and water and life. Whoever enters through Jesus will find the safety and the fulfilment that makes life not only possible, but worth living.

In the order of service for the dedication of a new Church, the congregation and community gather inside the building. The doors are closed two minutes before the hour at which the service is to begin. The Moderator arrives outside and knocks three times on the closed door and says:

“Lift up your heads, you gates,

Lift yourselves up, you everlasting doors,

That the king of glory may come in.

From inside the Church, the congregations says:

“Who is the King of glory?”

The Moderator answers:

“The Lord of hosts, He is the King of Glory.”

The doors are opened (to a flourish of trumpets, it says in the Book of Common Order!) and the Moderator says,

“Peace to this house, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

The building and its various furnishings are blessed, and then, at the main inner door, these words are said:

“Grant that there may go forth from this place a great company of women and men to serve You faithfully for the good of their neighbours and the glory of Your Name.”

Jesus, the door; Jesus, the gate, is there to enable coming in and going out. He is no barrier, He is the access: door, gate, bridge; to God.

The day will come, please God, when the doors of the Church will open. The day will come, please God, when we will be able to come through the doors and sit together in company and friendship, to speak and listen, to sing and share, to laugh and cry, to be together, gathered, but open; in our places, and welcoming. I pray for that day, and I know many of you do too. The opening of the gate, the opening of the doors.

Jesus opens doors for us. Jesus opens gates for us. To forgiveness and to kindness; to community and to hospitality; to friendship and to love and to new beginnings.

During my Moderatorial travels when I was in Bethlehem I was taken to the place where they made the olive wood crosses that I gave as gifts during my year. The larger crosses for churches and institutions, and the smaller holding crosses for individuals. Speaking to one of the young men who made the crosses he held it not in the normal way, I thought. He noticed me looking

and raising an eyebrow, and he smiled. “For me”, he said, “the cross is like a key, Jesus is like a key, He opens doors.” In Advent we sometimes think of Jesus as the “key of David”.

In a glorious mixing of metaphors, Jesus is not only key; He is door; He is gate. And He comes to open.

The day will come when Jesus will open the doors and gates of this Church, our homes, our world, our hearts. Let Him in, then go out with Him, wherever He leads you, to help, to serve, to love, to be His people, as you have been shaped to be.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**