

## ***'I am the Gate', but what sort of Gate?***

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor  
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*Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:1-10; John 10: 1-10*

"I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10: 9-10).

If Jesus is the gate, what sort of gate is he? Is he the sort of gate more and more Christians are looking for in a time of change and uncertainty for religious institutions: a gate to shut firmly in the face of the ill-fitting, the unsuitable—a kind of bulkhead, separating us from them, the in from the out, or, literally, in the case of a bulkhead on a ship, separating the drowned from the saved?

But what sort of gate is Jesus, really, in the light of today's Gospel—part of a longer passage in John with several images from the realm of shepherding—and in the context of our other readings today? I want to look at some clues in and around today's Gospel to help us answer this question, and so to help us understand and appreciate the abundant life that Jesus the gate opens for us.

The first clue in today's Gospel is that Jesus distinguishes himself and what he brings from the whole world of thieves and bandits, and what they bring. They're in the business of disappointment, of grievance, aren't they, feeling life is all scarcity, hard-done-by, and hence their world is one of jealousy, of rivalry, a world of taking, of harming. In response to which the rest of us become nervous, and anxious to protect ourselves, don't we—wary of strangers, protective of our own, resentful of the outsider, the foreigner, the asylum seeker, and particularly eager to blame the criminal class, to punish them, insisting on longer sentences and, in America, demanding the death penalty. Because, of course, the world of thieves and bandits-of terrorists, too-is a world that we readily get caught up in. Our world, too, comes to be dominated by fear, by the angry solidarity of group against group.

It's a world ultimately in thrall to the power of death-to the fear that life, and the good things of life, might be taken away from us. But this is not the world into which Jesus, the gate, introduces us; this is not abundant life. Rather, this is an anti-Eucharistic world: a world of gated communities, of unrepentant nations, and of infallible Churches, both Catholic and Protestant. This is the opposite of the abundant life that is Jesus' wish for us.

The second clue appears if we follow on in John's Gospel, beyond today's reading, to the better-known claim that Jesus is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. This image strengthens the sense emerging for me here that Jesus takes us beyond the whole world of anxiety, fearfulness, violence and sacrifice. Why? Well sheep, you see, were about more than lamb chops and knitwear and ugh-boots in Jesus' day. They were the sacrificial animals par excellence—cannon fodder in a culture that keeps cultural, anthropological, religious peace always at the expense of sacrificial victims (in this case, sheep). But Jesus is the good shepherd, who gives his life for the sheep—that is, I suggest, who goes the way of sacrifice on their behalf, in their place, bringing to an end the need for sacrifice and scapegoating that makes the world go round. This is our original sin, and Jesus the good shepherd breaks its hold on us—he bears it for us and, in his resurrection as the forgiving victim, we see the whole world of victimisers and victim mentality and sacrifice and scapegoating outed and undermined. Here again is the abundant life that Jesus opens for us.

The third clue is also in the passage following on from today's Gospel, which you can look up at home. Jesus is the one who brings together his sheep from different sheepfolds—different churches, as the scholars tell us—so there's one flock, one shepherd. This is an invitation to see the Church in terms of solidarity and mutual identification, gathered in unity around Jesus rather than defined by mutual enmity, suspicion and exclusion. If Jesus the Good Shepherd is also the gate, he is the gate of a diverse yet united Church—a Church able to model a way forward for violent, warring humanity.

We Anglicans used to be good at being this sort of diverse yet united church. But, nowadays, strident voices are raised in our communion, about who is and who isn't worthy to be counted among us. We'll see whether those who claim most loudly the patronage of Jesus for their version of Anglicanism will heed his invitation to be one flock under one shepherd ... or, whether the crucial next stage of our life together as a worldwide communion will bring the end of our communion.

In this Gospel image of one flock, one shepherd, however, we see once again the abundant life which Jesus brings, but spelled out in terms of genuine community—where no-one is forced to be someone they're not in order to fit in; in which each sheep is loved and liked and can relax, and discover a world suddenly full not of enemies but of friends, not of competitors but of collaborators. This is a pacific community, anticipating the whole of humanity at peace in the midst of creation, which is God's great ecological and political and spiritual dream for the world God loves.

The last and biggest clue to what sort of gate Jesus is comes from the text of today's Gospel itself. Jesus tells the sheep that with him as the gate, they "will come in and go out and find pasture". This is a lovely image, and in the light of all the other things I've been saying, I think I now understand it. Jesus as the gate is not a firm boundary of exclusion; Jesus does not insist on secure isolation; Jesus does not give identity to his sheep at the price of their narrow confinement. Rather, Jesus is the sort of gate that opens to a place of safety and welcome, yes, to a place of belonging, to a place of good pasture, but not to a place of isolation, or exclusion, or imprisonment. Here is identity and definition but freedom, also. If Jesus is a gate, he's more like a revolving door than a bulkhead. He's a porous barrier, if you like, so that, ideally, his Church is a community both of confident identity and genuine, non-anxious openness. Jesus as the gate is good news to his sheep and bad news to no-one.

As for the abundant life that Jesus brings, it's all around us this morning in word and sacrament. We see it in the poised, assured self-confidence of the psalmist, in today's well-loved twenty-third psalm: anointed on the head with the oil of welcome, handed an overflowing drink by God, and invited to the table of life. Ultimately, it is the Eucharistic table that God spreads for us in the face of our enemies, as a sign to the whole world that all the good things of life are God's gift, eagerly given—the good things of life aren't to be despaired over in an existence blighted by a mood of bitter victimhood, nor are they to be hoarded jealously at the cost of making victims.

And the Church of course is the community called to know this joy, infectiously. We see such joy in the pastoral idyll of our Acts reading today, as an unselfish, open-hearted joyful sense of God's presence issues in solidarity, fellowship and ample resources for the Church—Christians at peace with each other and at enmity with no-one.

But this Church which has learned to live beyond anxiety, peevishness and a scarcity mentality, this Church that knows the joy of abundant, Eucharistic life, this Church which has left behind the world of thieves and bandits, of locked gates, in favour of a life beyond fear and death with the risen Jesus Christ—this Church is one that we have to really want. Hence the sensible advice of 1 Peter today, that Christians have to let go of guile, insincerity, envy

and slander. To act like this with each other isn't so much to commit a moral wrong, as to perpetuate a misunderstanding. We have been freed of any need to justify ourselves, to demonstrate our worth, to win the love and affection of God, and have been given all this as a free gift in our baptism, to celebrate for a lifetime together week by week in the Eucharist, the ritual enactment of our abundant life in Jesus. To keep acting as if life is all threat, isolation, fear, self-preservation, strategic-alliance and suspicion, however—the whole joyless, sinful, crimped and meagre package, in other words—isn't just wrong. Rather, it's dull-witted, and unnecessary.

We have been given the abundant life; as 1 Peter says today, we are newborn into this new way of being human, we have tasted it. Now it's up to us to “long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation”, as 1 Peter puts it—a salvation that's already ours, but which also remains ours to discover.

Jesus the gate defines us as his people, but today we're reminded what sort of people he's made us—not nervy, not anxious, not defensive; not competitive, conflicted, rivalrous; not violent; and certainly not bound to secure our solidarity by scapegoating; neither victimisers, nor prone to the mentality of victimhood. Jesus is the gate who gives those who pass in and out through it enough identity to feel secure and yet enough freedom to remain open to others, as God is open to others. This clarity yet magnanimity of person is the abundant life—the Eucharistic life, that is—which Jesus opens for us. The Church is meant to foster this abundant life within its own fellowship, forming us as people able to experience it and to witness to it for others. But it's a gift we have to consciously lay hold of—demonstrating that we've been set free from all those marks of the anti-abundant life, the anti-Eucharistic life: that is, set free from ‘all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander’.