

THE GATE TO LIFE

John 10:1-11

1 Peter 2:18-25

I wonder what you think of when you think of a gate? I think of the big gate at the bottom of the Manse drive. It may be that lots of people in Stow don't realise that there is a gate, because they are so used to seeing it stand open, and when it does that it tends to blend in to the fence behind it. We like to keep it open because that is more convenient for us and more welcoming for people coming up the drive - be they personal friends, people looking for the minister, or the postman and the milkman. An open gate speaks of welcome and of freedom.

However there are times when the gate is firmly shut. And these are the times when football is being played on the drive in front of the house. The drive runs down steeply to the main road, and we don't want to have any balls hurtling down to get tangled in the traffic. Nor do we want any small boys hurtling down after them. A closed gate is for safety.

When Jesus described himself as the gate, he had all this in mind: freedom, welcome and safety. His hearers wouldn't think of a five barred gate when they heard his metaphor. Nor would they think of wrought iron or white picket gates. Jesus is talking about sheepfolds, and in that land in those days the gate of the sheepfold was invariably human. The gate was the shepherd, who lay down in front of the gap in the walls, so that no person or animal could come in or out without his knowledge. The gatekeeper and the gate were the same person. The gatekeeper and the shepherd were the same person. That person's function was to keep the sheep safe, and yet to give them their liberty. They were able to go in and out and find pasture.

If you are a parent you will know that liberty with safety is what we all want for our children: the chance to have fun, to explore, to discover for themselves, but with no risk of any harm coming to them. And most often parents have to compromise a bit on one or the other hope, struggling to keep security and liberty in balance as we watch over our children. Jesus says that he is the gate, the human gate, and he can give that impossible freedom and care to all his sheep.

He can do this because he is different from anyone who has come before. When have you heard this before? Doesn't it sound like a politician seeking election? Don't they invariably compare themselves with the fellow in the other party - especially if the other party is in power, and don't they say "But I'm different. And I will do things differently - better." And once you elect them isn't it too often the case that they make some changes at first, but that as time goes by it becomes hard to distinguish them from the other fellow. You see it in the reaction of the media. Remember how ecstatic they were at Labour's victory in the 1990s, and see how they are less prepared to take government pronouncements at face value now, after years of watching them govern.

Or think of Robert Mugabe - Zimbabwe being still very much in our minds these days. When he came to power, he was hailed as the saviour of his country - both by those inside the country and by many outside. And he did some good - at first. But now all we, who are outside, can see is the waste of the fertile land and the poverty and hunger of the people. He may have been different than those who came before him, but he turned out not to be better.

But here comes Jesus saying, "All who came before me are thieves and bandits." He is setting himself up as someone quite different from what has been known, whether it is the way of the Law of Moses, or the way of the freedom fighting Zealots.

When we read John's gospel, we should always bear in mind that right back, in his introduction, John indicated that when he shows us Jesus, he will be showing us Jesus revealing God to us. (John 1:18). In this passage of the gospel we have Jesus revealing his gift of life, which is God's gift of new life to us. New life is of course the Easter connection. It is why we read this passage just three weeks after Easter Day. Jesus rose to newness of life and new life is what he offers to us. But for us it doesn't have to begin after death, it begins right now, as Jesus offers us a life superior to all else - before him, or, indeed since.

We want life to be better, to be different than it is. We live in an age which is full of theories and ideas about how life can be improved. From New Age Philosophies and the rekindling of interesting ancient superstitions to the self-help books which line the bookshop shelves; from an interest in counselling (often misunderstood, it's not designed to change your life but to help you cope with the life you have) to financial and health insurance packages; from political theories to an emphasis on continual learning; from fitness programmes to meditation tapes, we are offered many ways in which we can improve our lives. And many of them can be helpful, though some are not. But to them all Jesus says, "[My] sheep follow [me] because they know [my] voice....All who come before me are thieves and bandits." Jesus says that he is radically different, and he is better.

After all, what other theory or idea, what other person can give the care which Jesus offers his sheep: care which is personal - he knows us by name. I was at the Muirhouse farm last Sunday, and saw the sheep and lambs there. They were known by number and by colour-coding, as indeed sheep usually are nowadays. But Jesus knows us by name, personally. Where else either can we find such care, which is appropriate - we can both go in, take refuge in him when we need safety, reassurance and comfort, and we can go out for freedom and discovery? Or where can we find such care as his which is life-giving?

Think again of our politicians and the claims that they make. They so often cannot keep their promises because they grow to like power and they shy away from suffering. But Jesus doesn't do this. It seems he is changing the metaphor when he suddenly switches from being gate to shepherd in verse 11, but it is simply another way of saying the same thing. Only now he wants to highlight another facet of the shepherd's role: he is prepared to suffer for his sheep - for us. Jesus accepts suffering as part of the package. This is how he is different and this is how he can speak to the reality of our whole lives.

Peter, who wrote when he had had time to think deeply about Jesus' life and death describes his suffering as an important part of who Jesus is. His suffering is for us, for our sakes, but is also a pattern for us to cling to when life brings suffering our way. And so he enjoins the slaves who suffered unjustly to remember Jesus, to suffer in silence like him, and thus to show that they follow Jesus and what sort of a Lord it is whom they follow.

And so we have this encouragement for our own times of suffering. I know that

there are those who, while they suffer, whether physically with illness, or mentally with anxiety and grief, feel guilty about saying that they are having difficulty. They compare themselves to those in other parts of the world whose suffering seems much more extreme: the people of Iraq, or our brothers and sisters in Zimbabwe come to mind readily; the people of Bangladesh still rebuilding after flooding, or the terrorised refugees of Darfur. And yes indeed there are many who suffer very deeply in this world. Suffering is part of the human experience but when it is imposed by others it is deplorable, and some people have more to cope with than others.

But simply because we think others suffer more doesn't mean that we can't acknowledge our own pain and difficulty. Suffering is part of our lot in this world, but Jesus came to transform even that, to show us that even that can be part of the fullness of life he gives us. No other person or philosophy can tie the whole of life together the way that Jesus does. A full life is not one-dimensional, but includes all sorts of elements. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, and so the sheep can find point in their own suffering by using it to remember the shepherd.

In John's Gospel we see Jesus revealing God, and in this passage Jesus reveals God as one who offers life and doesn't see suffering as pointless. He doesn't will it for us in a sort of general "it'll be good for you" way; but when it comes He can use even the most profound suffering to teach us and refine us, and even to give us a quiet witness to others about God's care in real life. It sounds bland or banal, but that's before you apply it personally. How often people who have endured or are still enduring difficulties that make most of us blanch at the thought, tell me that they have never known God so close, that they are amazed at the peace that has come with their pain.

Have you ever sat down to write a letter and having finished, read it through and torn it up to start all over again? Have you ever listened to someone give directions, or instructions about how to do something, and then had to ask them to explain all that again, please, because you just didn't follow it? In this excerpt from John's gospel we find Jesus struggling to explain himself. I like that. Even as I was struggling to write this sermon I was encouraged by the thought that Jesus found these things hard to explain. That's why he begins in the third person, then changes to the first person to describe himself as the gate, and then changes the wording again to call himself the shepherd.

If we read Matthew, Mark and Luke, we find a lot of sayings and stories which they have in common, but we don't find this passage, or some others like it, which we have only in John. I sometimes get the impression that Matthew, Mark and Luke wrote what was already memorable and helpful in the young church. Short sayings short stories, which repay deep pondering, but which are fairly easy to get at least one layer of meaning from. But John probably wrote later than the other three. He wrote later, and he was, perhaps, of a different mentality. You can get the impression that John likes to have longer, deeper, more difficult things to ponder over.

Fullness of life is not a glib, easily understood thing. It is as we ponder Jesus' words, ponder them and consider too our own lives, with their joys and sorrows, their frustrations and opportunities that we will find what he is saying to us. My prayer is that as we do so we will find his joy growing in our hearts, and will find in him the freedom to go in and come out, to know safety and security and adventure.