

The Door

Text: John 10:1-10

Picture the scene. Jesus was walking along in Jerusalem with his disciples, and came across a man who had been blind from birth. Jesus healed the man by spreading mud mixed with spittle on his eyes, and telling him to wash them in a rock pool outside the city walls. Word of this miracle soon got to the religious authorities, the Pharisees. They didn't like it a bit. It was the Sabbath. By healing a man, Jesus broke the prohibition to work. He induced the healed man to do the same by telling him to go and wash in a far away place. Moreover, this upstart rabbi Jesus was not even one of them: 'We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.' (Jn 9:29) In party-political terms, Jesus was an independent!

Not being able to find Jesus, the Pharisees hauled in the man who was blind until recently. They questioned the man about his healing and his healer. The man gave an excellent answer,

'Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.' (9:30-33)

The Pharisees didn't like this a bit either,

They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out. (9:34)

In that deeply religious society, to be driven out of the synagogue was no symbolic punishment. It meant becoming a social outcast. Once you were excommunicated, all doors shut on you. Jesus went out of his way to find this poor fellow in order to tell him that one door remained open:

[Jesus] said to [the man], "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. (9:35b-38)

None of that was in our reading today; you can read it for yourselves in John Chapter 9. So why am I telling you about it? Because it is in *this* context that, at the beginning of Chapter 10, we find Jesus telling a parable about sheep, sheepfolds, and shepherds:

... truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

Apparently, none of his audience understood what he was on about:

Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

This was perhaps not surprising. Jesus was switching rapidly between two metaphors in his little parable - talking about himself alternately as the *gate* to the sheepfold, and as the *shepherd*. So in what follows, he disentangles the two metaphors. The rest of our passage today is about Jesus as the *gate*:

I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 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.

There our reading stops, just before Jesus went on to the second metaphor, 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.' Jesus the good shepherd is, of course, the famous metaphor. Artists paint it; congregations name their churches after it, preachers preach on it; composers write songs and arias about it. But no one ever pays any attention to Jesus the *gate* to the sheepfold. Yet, here it is, in our passage today, twice: 'I am the gate.' Or, as some versions say, 'I am the door.'

This is one of the seven very emphatic 'I am' statements found on the lips of Jesus in this Gospel. Each one of them tells us something vital about Jesus and our relationship with him. What, then, should we make of this metaphor of the door? To answer this question, we need to recall the context. This passage comes immediately after the cured blind man was booted out of the synagogue by the religious leaders. 'We are followers of Moses,' they said to the man. To them, it simply was inconceivable that anyone who didn't 'do Moses' as they did could possibly be from God. To them, 'doing Moses'

includes not healing and not walking more than strictly necessary. Anyone who did those things got the door shut in their faces.

The contrast with Jesus the open door could not have been more stark:

I am the gate. *Whoever* enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.

'Whoever' - no one is barred, all who want to enter by Jesus the door may enter, and find salvation. We've just seen a worked example - the blind man entered by that door, and was saved. That is the kind of door Jesus is. That is good news indeed.

Quite rightly, the sheepfold that Jesus talked about has long been taken as a metaphor for the church. Our passage today therefore prompts us to reflect on the church as door. What kind of door do we make?

To answer that rather abstract question, Archbishop William Temple suggests that we should think in these concrete terms: as we seek to draw men and women into the Kingdom of God, do we end up calling them 'to adopt *our* traditions and to follow *our* manner of life'? If we do, then we are not pointing to the door that is Jesus; rather we are behaving like, in Jesus' own words, 'thieves and bandits'.

Jesus was clearly accusing the Pharisees of behaving like thieves and bandits. They kept people out by their legal minutiae. Their legal codes eventually came to define in detail 39 categories of work on the Sabbath. We don't do that. But what we do quite literally at our front door should make us pause for thought.

As each person comes through our door, we hand them this much [SHOW!] paperwork. Where else in modern living does this happen? Where else are men and women, or boys and girls, required to follow closely typed text to participate in an hour-long event? And the text doesn't come from one place; it comes from, typically, three - the green hymn book, the liturgy book, and the pews paper. In Matins, it's four - there's also the canticles booklet. The fact is, no one can become part of our sheepfold unless they 'adopt *our* traditions and to follow *our* manner of life' in this matter. *Whoever* enters and becomes an expert paper shuffler will be saved.

Can we do things another way? Almost certainly. Of course, it is very hard to conceive of doing things any other way. But we are in the Easter season, and

there is no better season for thinking the inconceivable. If we do thing another way, it may mean that St. Peter's as we know it will be no more. But John is the gospel in which we read:

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. (Jn 12:24)

For years St. Anthony's Catholic Church in San Francisco has served meals to people in need. Over the doorway to its dining room, there is a sign that says: *Caritate Dei*. One day a young man newly released from jail came through the door and sat down for a meal. A woman was busy cleaning the adjoining table. "When do we get on our knees and do the chores, lady?" he asked. "You don't," she replied. "Then when's the sermon comin'?" he inquired. "Aren't any," she said. "How 'bout the lecture on life, huh?" "Not here," she said.

The young man became suspicious. "Then what's the gimmick?" The woman pointed to the inscription over the door. He squinted at the sign. "What's it mean, lady?" "Out of love for God," she said with a smile, and moved on to another table.

Who do we want to come through our front door? As they do so, what would they think is written on top of it? Do we love enough to become a Jesus-shaped door?