

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

“I Am The Gate Of The Fold”

What a generous, humble statement this is for Jesus to make! *To be a gate* is not, you might think, a very exalted vocation: there are some splendiferous gates, and we have in our great Derbyshire ironworker, Robert Bakewell, the most famous maker of them (you can visit his work in Derby Cathedral, or in the garden of Melbourne Hall). But most gates are pretty utilitarian, and some are positively decrepit, in the sense that they no longer close. It is in their excluding capacity that gates fail, rather than in their function of giving access.

Opening And Closing

In the Old Testament there is an honourable rôle for a gatekeeper, one who holds the keys, opening and closing as appropriate. In the Gospel of Matthew Peter is given this rôle for the Kingdom of Heaven (not just for the Church, notice!) and we also hear that Jesus arraigns the Pharisees and lawyers for “shutting up the Kingdom of Heaven in people’s faces, neither going in yourselves, nor allowing others to go in who want to”. Our Gospel today goes further. In claiming to be the gate, rather than the gatekeeper, Jesus makes a huge claim for himself. He is not here just to exercise a porter’s judgment over who comes in or is kept out: their entry or exclusion depends on their attitude to Jesus himself. They must enter through him, or not at all. Further, those who try to enter some other way are thieves and brigands, whose intention towards the sheep is violent and predatory.

Way, Truth And Life

This reminds us of Jesus warning us, *No-one can come to the Father except through me*. If Jesus is the Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity, this is obviously true. In our woolly post-modern way, we want to believe that there are many ways to God, and that is true in terms of human experience. But in terms of the God we find when we reach our terminus, there is no variety. The God who will be found by Mohammed and the Buddha will always be the Holy Trinity: there is only one God. For them too, access to the Father will be granted through the mediation of the Son in the Holy Spirit.

One Shepherd For All

This belief about the terminus of the human search for God may help us to understand the words of

the living Jesus in the Palestine of his day. He was offering those who listened an *entrance* into God’s fold; through him, they could enter into the care of the Father. Clearly he felt their distance from the Father like a pain, and the contrast between their experience of being human, and his own knowledge of the love of the Father for him. There’s always something hugely powerful when John’s Gospel says the same thing as the other three: and here is the image of the shepherd setting out to find the lost sheep, in the words of the Fourth Evangelist, using his most solemn formula: *I am the gate of the sheepfold*. Anyone who has reflected on his life will know what it means to be a door for someone else; our mother is literally a door through whom we enter into life; parents “open” to allow us to inherit the world, as far as they are free to give us its gifts. Our teachers enormously represent doors into knowledge and appreciation. The great artists, authors, and composers beckon us out of selfishness into sharing, as their voice or their work reaches us across the gulf of space and time; and our friends’ hospitality is truly a gift from God, as they invite us into intimacy with them, as a door opens into a welcoming house. Above all, we should see to it that the Church herself acts as a hostess to all humanity, feeding, teaching, accepting, listening. Jesus is a door, and it is open to all. We have to make sure that we speak with his voice, and do our irreplaceable work, in making good his promises in our lives.

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