

**I am the door**  
*Psalm 23, John 10:1-10*

7 May 2017

This year will see the bicentenary of Jane Austen's death and apparently there are already great celebrations planned to mark the occasion. Among the many spin-offs of her work there is a recent film about a 21<sup>st</sup> century girl from London called Amanda, who is so mesmerised by the imaginary world of *Pride and Prejudice*, that she finds a 'doorway' in her bathroom wall through which she can enter into the world of the book and finds herself in the middle of the story of Elizabeth Bennett and Mr Darcy. Of course, this is a fantasy story, but one where the doorway plays a crucial role: it is at the intersection of the two worlds, through which inhabitants of both worlds may come and go. Being a film-buff, perhaps it's not surprising that this is the picture that came to my mind as I was thinking of Jesus' words in the passage we have just heard from John's Gospel, 'I am the door'.

This is not an easy passage. First of all, in its Lectionary position it is cut off from both the story leading up to it and also from what follows, which are both important if we want to understand it. It is followed by the well-known and much loved part about Jesus the good shepherd. In the previous chapter the Gospel writer tells us about Jesus' healing of the man born blind. In that story the blind man has to account for himself and for the one who healed him before the Pharisees. In their traditional, over-zealous religiosity they cannot see God's work in the restoration of this blind man, so they turn him out. Jesus finds him again, and in a kind of after-care he restores his spiritual sight as well as the physical one. Then he talks to the Pharisees who are also present and the passage we heard is really addressed to them as an answer to their behaviour towards the excluded, blind beggar. They are the 'thieves and robbers' and the 'strangers', who do not care for the sheep, who do not come through the door and whose voice is not recognised by the sheep. It is in this context that we have to hear the passage and try to make sense of it for ourselves.

Things are also complicated by the fact that it contains metaphors of a particular social setting, which most of us are not familiar with. I do have two nieces, both of whom have been married to sheep farmers, but even that does not qualify me for knowing

much about sheep-farming. Yet, we all know about Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Apparently, in the first few centuries of Christianity the abiding image used in Christian art was not Jesus on the cross, but Jesus the Good Shepherd carrying a lost sheep around his shoulders. This is a sight we can all relate to, we all know what it is to be lost, or to feel lost, and there is a way in which we all need a Good Shepherd, who can take care of us, look after us, make sure that we are safe and that all our needs are met.

So this is one of the metaphors used for Jesus in our reading and it will be enlarged upon in the rest of the Chapter, which will come in the Lectionary next year for this same, fourth Sunday of Easter. But today's passage also contains two more telling pictures: the door or gate to the sheepfold and the door-keeper, or gate-keeper according to which translation you use. Today we are going to reflect on the different meanings of the gate. Initially, a gate is no more than the natural way between the inner safety of the sheepfold and the freedoms and dangers of the outside world. Sheep farming may not be our thing, yet we can appreciate the importance of this threshold, which accommodates the safe movement of the sheep in and out of the pen. It is usually a sturdy wooden or metal construction and its job is to open towards the abundance of green pastures in the morning and to close for protection against the dangers of the night at the end of the day.

Well, we in our churches know about doors and about their significance. Most of our churches used to have heavy wooden doors and I am sure there were good reasons for having them. Some of those churches may have contained rich treasures, silver and gold vestments, chalices, plates etc, which needed to be guarded. Others gave shelter to persecuted Christians, who didn't want to draw attention to themselves; so they worshiped behind heavy and securely closed doors. Either way, there was no mistaking their function: they were designed to protect what was inside and keep out anything threatening from the outside. They were dividing fixtures between two worlds.

They remind me of a picture that my father took a long time ago. He was quite a good amateur photographer. This particular photo showed the thick, solid wooden doors of our village church on a sunny Sunday afternoon. As the sun was blazing down on the tightly closed doors, and flooded them with a gloriously bright light my father managed to capture something extraordinary about them.

“I wanted to show” – he explained to me – that there was something beautiful and desirable behind those doors.”

Many years later churches at large came to the same conclusion: our doorways needed to show that ‘there was something beautiful and desirable’ on the other side of them. So we flung open our solid, heavy doors and replaced them with glass doors. And with that action we accepted the challenge of showing to everyone what attracts us to our faith and why we think it is something worth sharing. We have also come to understand that the gap between the two worlds was not unbridgeable and if we ourselves listened to the voice of our Good Shepherd more closely, he would lead us out to places where, even amongst the dangers we could safely follow him.

The parable then goes further, mixing its metaphors a bit. It claims that Jesus is the door. This metaphor is based on the ancient shepherding practice, where the entrance to the sheep pen does not have actual gates; it is the shepherd who lies across it once all the sheep are safely inside and with his very body protects them from any danger. At the time of writing this Gospel John’s early Christian community was in a threatened situation, they were expelled from their synagogues and suffered persecution both from the Romans and from their own Jewish leaders. So, they would have taken courage from this picture and would have seen the Easter message reinforced by it. Even after the calamities of Good Friday, because of the Resurrection the protecting presence of the risen Christ remained with them. This enabled them to stand firm in their faith and deal with all the trials and tribulations of their lives.

But, what of us? Thankfully, we are not in any kind of physical danger because of our faith. How can we understand Jesus as a door or a gate? The temptation may still be to see Him as a dividing point between us, the insiders, and the ‘world’ outside. Yet everything we know about the life of Jesus of Nazareth firmly contradicts this view. He never made any distinctions between insiders and outsiders; if anything he seemed more interested in the outsiders and challenged the so-called insiders for their smug self-satisfaction.

No, I am thinking more in terms of the film I mentioned in the introduction. The door in Amanda’s bathroom wall turns out to be the gateway into another, to her, more desirable world. She goes through it, enjoys the delights of it, falls in love with Mr Darcy, learns the refined social customs of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. But the story does not

end there, through the same door Amanda is led back to her own 21<sup>st</sup> century world, where nothing has really changed in her absence. Except that she is now a changed person. Enriched by all she had seen and learnt in that other world, the friendships she made, the love she experienced, she can now find her place in the mundane routine of her everyday life. Maybe, this is how Jesus can be a door for us. Through him we can enter into another world, which enables us to live a truly human life in this world.

The other way we can see Jesus as a door comes out of the way we, in our churches have changed our doors. We used to perceive their major purpose as solid protection, so we made them out of heavy wood, which stopped us from seeing what was outside and stopped others from seeing what was inside. Heavy doors, that we could hardly open ourselves, let alone anybody else. Would Jesus be that kind of door? Well, I think if we take of our new, clear glass doors, maybe the metaphor can work for us too. If Jesus is that kind of door, through him we can see the world in a different way. We can perceive it as it is without fear, with unconditional love and understanding, with openness and generosity.

And just a final word about the awkward metaphor of the doorkeeper, who also appears in Jesus’ parable; Who is it supposed to be? Ordinary, poor shepherds, of course, could not afford to employ an extra worker, just to look after the gates or the doors. It was all done by the shepherd himself. But if there were gatekeepers, they would be in a relatively powerful position, because they would decide who could come and go through the gates. I am afraid, we Christians often act as if we were the gatekeepers for the Kingdom of God. The good news is that if Jesus is the door we do not need to do that job for him. We do not have to worry about the ‘wrong kind of people’ getting in. We can remember that perhaps at some point we were ‘the wrong kind of people’, and maybe sometimes we still are, yet the door is open for us all and we are free to love and accept one another as God in Jesus Christ loves and accepts us.

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