

Sermon: *Going in and going out*

Text: 'I am the door: anyone who comes into the fold through me shall be safe' Gospel of John 10:9

This morning's text finds Jesus, not unusually, arguing with the Pharisees. During the argument Jesus talks of sheep and shepherds but also of robbers and thieves. He says,

"I tell you, 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 safe...."

This whole argument is complicated because Jesus calls himself both the shepherd and the gate to the sheepfold. Next week we will look at Jesus saying 'I am the good shepherd'.

Today our focus is on 'I am the door' or 'I am the gate'.

What does Jesus mean when he says: 'I am the gate'?

It will help us if we look firstly at why Jesus was arguing with the Pharisees. If we consider what was said before Jesus started talking about sheep.

Jesus had just healed a blind man: a man who had been blind from birth. Jesus had made some clay from the dirt on the ground the saliva in his mouth and placed it on the man's eyes. The man had been healed. He could see.

But instead of celebrating the Pharisees were angry. There were several reasons for this:

- Jesus healed on the Sabbath
- the healing was a direct challenge to their authority because they could not heal him
- they believed the man's affliction was not simply a physical misfortune but divinely imposed punishment for sin

Let us think for a moment about the blind man. He had been blind from birth. Can we imagine how would it feel to live in a world of permanent darkness? What would it be like, having never seen your parents or your home? Even more terrible would be the shame and the guilt of being told that your blindness the result of sin. Can you imagine what it would be like to be told that you deserved to be blind because of some sin you or your parents had committed. No doubt, this blind man would have thought there was no way out of his world of darkness. No escape – no release - into the light.

Maybe some of us today can empathise with this man. Maybe we feel as blind, trapped in our own private darkness: physical – emotional – spiritual. Some darkness, some torment, some prison from which we long to be set free. Will I ever see again? Will I ever heal from an old hurt? Will I ever be able to forgive - forgive others - forgive myself ? Most of us have felt or still feel that feeling of being trapped, of not knowing how to get out.

But Jesus said, "I am the gate. I came that [the sheep] may have life, and have it abundantly."

For the blind man in our reading, Jesus was the way out of his darkness, the gate through which he could be healed, released and restored, to have life, and have it abundantly.

But as I have already said the Pharisees were not at all happy with what Jesus did for the blind man. They tried to disprove the miracle. They tried to get the man's parents to change their story. They tried to get the man himself to change his story. Rather than giving Jesus credit, so to speak, for the miracle, instead to say simply that God had healed him. But the (formerly) blind man refused and insisted that it was Jesus who had healed him.

So the Pharisees went further. They suggested that the power Jesus displayed did not come from God but the Devil. But why would the Devil do good? No, Jesus must be from God. This gave the Pharisees a major problem. According to their belief the man's blindness was caused by sin, then it must be that Jesus had the power to forgive sin, and since only God could forgive sin, then Jesus must be God. But this they could not - would not - accept. It challenged their beliefs, their ideology, their place - their authority - in their perceived scheme of things. Their basic concern was not with the well being of the man but with their own position.

Jesus knew how the Pharisees were thinking and likened them to thieves and robbers who try to sneak in at night, who go over the wall and not through the sheep gate, to steal the sheep for their own profit.

When we think of sheepfolds we might imagine rough shelters away from the villages and towns outside on the hillside. But the first image of a sheepfold Jesus uses was that which might have been found within a typical Palestinian village of his time. Such villages usually had a few large homes in the centre. The courtyards of these homes would be animal pens for the entire community. High walls would surround the courtyards. Walls with one central gate that was guarded around the clock. The true shepherds keeping flocks there would come and go through the gate but thieves and robbers, of course, would have to climb over the walls to get to the sheep. Jesus called the Pharisees thieves and robbers because their concern was not for the sheep; it was only for themselves. Their fear of losing their position as the spiritual guides of the people had driven them to become judgmental, unforgiving, self-righteous, and uncaring. They were so intent on retaining their own power that they would rather see a fellow Jew remain blind than admit that some of their ideas about God might be wrong.

But Jesus was not like them. Jesus said he was the gateway to God. As the true gateway, Jesus was different than the Pharisees. Rather than judging the blind man as sinful Jesus saw him as a child of God in need of healing. And instead of jealously guarding his power, Jesus used it to bring good to another human being. Rather than adhere to a rule about Sabbath-breaking, Jesus adhered to a higher rule of love and doing good. Jesus was a gateway to God because he embodied forgiveness, compassion, concern for others. Compassion and concern that knew no limits.

Later in our reading Jesus said,
"I am the gate for the sheep.
Whoever enters by me will be saved,
and will come in and go out and find pasture."

When he said this he was thinking of another type of sheepfold not in the villages out in the hills and mountains. Usually round pens made of stones or hedges of thorns with one opening for the sheep to come in and go out through. No door across the opening, and at night, when the sheep were in the pen, the shepherd would lie down across the opening so that nothing could enter or leave without his knowledge. The shepherd became, literally, the gate of the sheep pen.

Jesus' meaning is clear.

Just as the shepherd became the gate to the safety and security of the fold so Jesus is the gate – the door – through which we can enter into the safety and security of the presence of God.

And just as a shepherd sees his sheep coming in and going out of the fold so Jesus sees the comings and goings of his people. "Going in and coming out" - common Hebrew phrase for going about your every day business in a peaceful and secure fashion. To go in and out through Jesus is to go about the business of life knowing that you are in his constant care and under his constant protection.

Jesus said that through the gate the sheep go out to find pasture. By this he is telling us that through him you and I can find those things necessary to sustain our lives. When we make him the gateway to the rest of life, we are assured that we will find nourishment to sustain us, food for our bodies, our minds and our souls.

We might say that Jesus became the gateway through which the blind man gained access to the presence of God – to heaven. The forgiveness, the healing, the spiritual nourishment, the daily guidance that Jesus offered us is actually an offer of heaven. Jesus had said that in his ministry the "kingdom of God" was coming into the world, which means nothing else but that with Jesus, heaven came to earth. And Jesus was the gateway, the route that God took to get here

As the gate to heaven, Jesus has done an amazing thing for us. He offers us a way out of whatever it is that traps us, confines us, blinds us to the blessings of an abundant life. His way is not like the Pharisees, not a way of condemning, power grabbing, and self-seeking that effectively cuts off everyone from God. Jesus way is the way of the shepherd who serves as a gate to the safety of the pen and the nourishment of the pasture. Jesus is the gateway of heaven, allowing us a glimpse into heaven to see how God works, and allowing something of heaven to come into our world

Jesus said 'I am the gate'. But a gate, no matter how beautiful, no matter how promising, is of no use unless a person actually chooses to go through it. Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." And Jesus said, "I am the gate": the gate to life in all its fullness, the gate to life everlasting. The gate is there open for us. All we have to do is go through it.

Amen.