

Doors

Lent 2019

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Rev Dr Simon Perry

Doors – Introduction

20th January 2019

Some of you might be familiar with the painting entitled the Light of the World, by the pre-Raphaelite artist, Holman Hunt. The allegorical painting depicts Jesus, carrying a lantern, and knocking at a door – a door that has been unopened for so long it has become overgrown with weeds and ivy. A door with no handle on the outside, that can only be opened by the person inside.

The original copy of this painting hangs in the Chapel of Keble College, in Oxford where I once attended a profoundly uninspiring lecture on the meaning of the painting. Far more insightful, I think, is a version of the painting with some captions attached, a copy of which has been printed off my computer and is occasionally placed on public display on the door to Flat 1, Herschel Court. The captions are a brief exchange between Jesus at the door, and the person inside the house. The conversation goes like this: Let me in! / Why? / I want to save you! / From what? / From what I'm going to do to you if you don't let me in! In other words, a picture of salvation that became dominant but that has little to do with the biblical portrayal of Jesus.

Like popstars having to explain their lyrics, towards the end of his life, Hunt himself felt it necessary to explain the imagery in the painting: that the door signifies the 'obstinately shut mind' – the obstinately shut mind. On an entirely unrelated topic, our Prime minister this week, stood in Downing Street, announced that her door is open, quickly retreated to Number 10, and closed the door. And so headline-writers in the press have had a field day, playing with the symbolism of the door.

Doors, after all, are profoundly symbolic entities, and this term we will be exploring much of the symbolism they represent. We have had doors in Europe, for at least five thousand years. And almost universally in Indo-European language and thought, the door represents 'the world outside' from the perspective of those inside. Long before any notion that doors kept people in, confined, contained, imprisoned etc, their principle function was to keep the world outside, well and truly outside.

Well – apologies for stating the brutally obvious, but as with most of the items on which we rely on a daily basis, it is only when they cease functioning that the role they play in our lives becomes obvious.

The world inside is safe, supportive, nurturing – the world outside is competitive, hostile, dangerous. To live then, in a dwelling with a door – affords those within the house a sense of security and familiarity. But the authority of the domus, the lord of the household, ends at the door. Once you set foot outside your door, you fall into your natural place in the midst of whatever hierarchies dominate the world at large. But – if you're the person that controls your door – you have your place of refuge, your place to return, the safe space – over which you, to some extent, are master.

Once you have ventured out beyond your dwelling, without that door to secure your dwelling, the dwelling would be publicly accessible, a different place, no longer a home, a refuge or a support. That door is what keeps the world at bay, even while you're not there – and while you negotiate your way through that world, you do so in the knowledge that you have that place to which you can return.

All that to say, of course, that the door represents the portal between that sphere of life over which you have relative control, and the sphere of life where you are explicitly subjected to the power games of the world at large.

It is easy, of course, to point to the crudest illiberal attempts to keep that frightening world out there at bay. As the great philosopher in possession of 'all the best words' once said, 'We need to build a wall!' The 'obstinately shut mind', is a vice readily identified amongst people we don't like, or with whom we disagree. Those horrible people out there, are the ones with closed minds, but 'my door is open'.

The softest target for accusations about closed minds, is of course religion, and Christianity in particular – despite the noise Christians make about opening the door to Jesus. But it's equally true in politics, where in this country this week, the language of keeping an open door seems to have been used by all major parties, in the hope that all the other major parties will come around to their point of view. And of course, it's no less true in student politics, where multiple strands of identity politics all-too-often display a staggeringly unselfconscious degree of judgmentalism, intransigence, and refusal to listen – all whilst jealously guarding the language of inclusivity. At every level of society then, the world is full of pseudo-liberal self-congratulatory claims about openness. And all the while the door remains closed.

Interestingly, though, Jesus doesn't use this language. The Gospel reading this evening reports Jesus at a key stage of his campaign. He has just finished gathering supporters in the region of Galilee – and now sets his sights on Jerusalem, 80 miles South. Now that he and his followers are about to quit their homeland and head to the Holy City, Jesus has warned them all that it's going to get ugly, and will not end well. And still people commit to following him. So he says look, even in nature animals have their safe spaces: foxes have holes and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. Any who follow him South are destined to share that same level of insecurity.

In other words, Jesus does not appear to be telling his followers to 'open the door'. Nor does he encourage them to stay holy and 'close the door'. Instead, he invites them to a life where there is no door. There is no refuge from the insecurity of the world at large. There is no dwelling over which you are the master. There is no ideological safe space where you can congratulate yourself in the knowledge that you are right, and the rest of the world are wrong. (The disciples constantly learn this the hard way). The only way to find true security, said one interpreter, is to abandon all security.

It reminds me of the reputation of the great warrior tribe, the Spartans in the ancient Hellenistic world. Their cities did not have walls, because the inhabitants were all warriors. Spartans are the walls. The followers of Jesus might well have made similar claims. There are no doors, because their lives are supposed to be the door, the threshold between two worlds, the portal between the familiar world, and whatever is beyond.

Of course, that has rarely proven true in Christian history. Perhaps the greatest irony, is that Holman Hunt's painting was meant for the Chapel at Keble, but before long it was closed off from the public, open to be viewed only by those who paid to see it. Restricted access to artwork concerned to promote openness.

At the heart of Christianity, is the formation of a community whose very way of life is a doorway, a living portal between unquestioned assumption and alternativity, between what we know and what we don't want to know; between what we think we know, and what we can't possibly know; between comfortable familiarity and disturbing otherness.

Intercession

Lord as we stand on the threshold to a new year, we are conscious of a growing sense of fear and insecurity as national disintegration and cultural hostility have become increasingly visible to increasing numbers. A sense of anxiety about the uncertain future facing our world.

For those who are angered, frustrated at not being heard, tired of being ignored, we pray for patience and we offer ourselves as a people who will genuinely listen without offering our diagnoses.

For those who have been forgotten, and always forgotten, we offer ourselves to be a means by which people are remembered, a means by which the voice of the voiceless is properly heard.

For those who govern without genuine consent from those who are governed, we offer ourselves to be a means to hold to account those in power.

And for ourselves, in our quest to do the right thing, confront us with the truth of who we really are, what are motivations really are, and what our behaviour really displays.

May we be a people who truly hear, that we might become a channel of your grace, a means by which your justice is done, and an accidental voice that cannot help but speak of your goodness, and mercy, and love.

By your grace, where optimism is in short supply and anxiety rife, make us a people driven by genuine hope.

Professor Morna Hooker

An Opened Door

3rd February 2019

‘Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank . . . the hot day made her feel very sleepy and stupid . . . when suddenly a white rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her. . . . There was nothing so very remarkable in that

. . . but when the Rabbit took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket, and looked at it, and then hurried on, Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket or a watch to take out of it’

So began Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, and in no time at all she followed the rabbit into a large hole and down a long tunnel, only to fall down a very, very deep well. Landing without harm at the bottom, she found herself in another tunnel, which led into a long, low hall, lit by a row of lamps hanging from the roof. All round the hall there were doors, but they were all locked; there seemed to be no way out. But then, on a table, she found a key, which appeared to be quite useless, being much too small for any of the locks. How frustrating! Alice persevered, and did the rounds of all the doors once more, and this time she discovered, hidden by a curtain, another, very small, door. And of course the tiny key fitted the tiny lock in the tiny door! But the door was- (since Alice lived in the pre-decimal age) a mere 15 inches high – much too small for even a small girl to squeeze through. She could open the door, but she could only gaze on the tantalizing view of a beautiful garden with bright flowers and fountains.

As the story progresses, poor Alice becomes more and more frustrated; first – since this is Wonderland – she succeeds in growing small enough to enter the little door, only to realize that she has foolishly relocked the door and replaced the key on the table, where she can no longer reach it. Then, when she manages to grow tall enough to reach the key, she overdoes things and finds herself so tall that she cannot possibly squeeze through any door. In what appears to be a nonsense story, but which is in fact ‘such stuff as dreams are made on’, Lewis Carroll succeeds in conveying the frustration we so often experience with metaphorical doors: doors which offer us opportunities, but which are slammed in our faces; doors which appear to lead where we want to go, but in the end don’t take us there; doors which keep us out when we want to get in, and in when we want to get out.

There is an inevitable ambiguity about a door. A door is placed in a wall or a building as a means of access; it is intended to let us in and out. In Ghana, to be sure, many years ago, I remember visiting villages where the houses had no doors; one had to scale the wall by means of steps or a ladder; in many ways this is a quicker and cheaper way to build a house, but most of us find a door more convenient. But a door can also be locked or barred to deny access; it can keep people and animals out or in. Shut the door of your hen-house, and you will keep the hens from straying; but you will also keep the foxes out. A locked door is a symbol of protection; if you are on the right side of it, you feel safe – safe from thieves, and even from bad weather. In the Middle Ages, those fleeing from their enemies would seek sanctuary in sacred buildings; the famous sanctuary knocker on the door of Durham Cathedral is a reminder of the safety which was offered to those who were on the right side of the door.

Ancient cities had impressive gates, which would be guarded by soldiers who closed the gates when enemies approached; the gates turned a walled city into a fortress. The walls and the closed door divide the insider from the outsider; to gain entry, you need to possess a key or know the password. To be inside the city is to be privileged, while to be excluded is to be denied access to those privileges. But houses and cities and churches are not the only

buildings with doors. Prisons also have doors – doors which deny their inmates access to freedom. It is hardly surprising, then, that a closed door is so often used as a metaphor for insuperable difficulties to doing what we had hoped to achieve.

Nor is it surprising that an open door is used as a symbol for opportunity. ‘If a door is locked’, it has been said, ‘then don’t waste time staring at it. Look for an open one.’ A couple of weeks ago I heard Michael Gove declaring: ‘This is the door through which we can walk Do we walk through that door, or do we lock it?’ There are no prizes for guessing what he was talking about, though perhaps others have locked what he believed to be an open door. But the metaphor he used is an old one.

Of course, open doors are not always what they seem. ‘Wide is the gate and broad the road that leads to destruction’, said Jesus. When Jews were transported across Europe in cattle-trucks and arrived at Auschwitz, they entered through wide, open gates bearing the message ‘Arbeit macht frei’ – a tragic early example of ‘fake news’. But the callous perversion of truth underlines the fact that essentially, the open door and wide gate are seen as offering opportunities.

Going through a doorway marks a new beginning, a new experience – which is why, presumably, doorways are said to explain what has been described as ‘room amnesia’. I frequently get up from my desk and walk into another room with the intention of doing something, only to forget, when I arrive, what it was I had to do there. It is comforting to discover that I am not necessarily suffering from senile decay, since many others apparently experience the same phenomenon. It seems that walking through a doorway can make us forget what we were thinking in the other room – and that presumably means that it can also give us the chance to think something new.

A year ago, the chaplain asked me to speak about hope, and I chose as the Old Testament reading the same verses from Hosea that we heard tonight.[1] In this passage Hosea uses the image of a husband who continues to love his adulterous wife as a symbol of the love of God for his faithless people Israel. God is willing to forgive her, and as a sign of this he will rename the valley which had been the way by which he had brought Israel into the Promised Land. The name of that valley had been Achor, which means ‘the Valley of Trouble’, so named because it had been the scene of sin and punishment, but from now on it is to be called ‘the Door of Hope’. The open door marked the beginning of a new relationship between God and his people.

In our New Testament reading,[2] the emphasis has shifted. Now, God, who had for centuries been regarded as the God of Israel, is understood to be the God of every nation. Paul, who had once been a Pharisee – a word that means ‘separated’ – and took care to keep himself separate from anyone who didn’t keep the Jewish Law in every detail, was now preaching a gospel which included everyone, Jews and non-Jews alike. All were called to be God’s people! His message was unpalatable to his fellow-Jews, who tried to put a stop to his activities. They stirred up the crowd to stone him and drag him out of town, but Paul refused to be put off. Why should he give up? God ‘had thrown open the gates of faith to the Gentiles’, he declared. In the past, to be a member of God’s people, you had to be Jewish; but now, the gates of faith had been thrown open, and everyone and anyone could come in – not just Gentile men, but, as Paul explains elsewhere, slaves and even women as well!

Paul uses the same image in one of his letters. Writing to Christians in Corinth, he tells them about his plans. He is going to remain in Ephesus for a few months, he says, because ‘a large and effective door has opened up’ – in other words, there was a great opportunity in Ephesus for effective evangelism.[3] And then, intriguingly, he adds ‘and there are many opponents’. I suspect that if you or I had been trying to express this, we would have written ‘but there are many opponents’. Surely the opposition might make him hesitate to go through the door, however

temptingly wide it might seem? But no! It made him all the more determined to take advantage of the opportunity that had opened up. An open door – to mix my metaphors – does not necessarily mean an easy ride. It is a challenge.

I have one final example of a biblical open door – and it is really the one that explains all the others. On the first Easter Sunday, a few women arrived at the tomb where Jesus' body had been laid, expecting to find the large stone which served as a door to be in place, only to discover that the stone had been rolled away. The closed door which had imprisoned the dead Jesus in the tomb had been flung open, and had become the way to life and freedom, not just for him, but for his followers. This is the door that truly 'macht frei'. For Christians, that open door marked a new beginning which – to use Paul's word – was 'effective' beyond anything that had been previously imagined.

[1] Hosea 2:2-6, 14-17.

[2] Acts 14:19-27.

[3] 1 Cor. 16:9.

Dr Christine Stopp

The gift behind the little door

10th February, 2019

I am going to talk today about opening doors and finding gifts; about recognising the gift and using it to enrich our lives. The gift of the advent of Jesus is after all that we may have life, and may have it in all its fullness. So no apologies for a theme distinctly Advent-y. The University calendar after all deprives us in this place of a true Advent.

What has lots of doors and is created to help celebrate one of the biggest Christian festivals? Advent calendars, of course. A nineteenth-century invention, the elaborately decorated advent calendar was designed to build up to the excitement of Christmas, and the Christmas gift of the baby Jesus.

When I was a child, the advent calendar was a simple affair of pictures on cardboard. In those innocent days you opened the doors one by one and discovered a jolly little image. The rosy-cheeked child with ribbons on her pigtails was expected to get excited about a robin on a sprig of holly, or a Christmas pudding. (Actually, if you held the picture up to the light it got all shiny and it actually was quite a treat...). The baby behind the last door was chubby and cute and had a little light-up halo. The infant version of the Jesus in Holman Hunt's 'Light of the World', which Professor Lieu showed us, and after which the great window of this chapel is named.

By the time I was already grown up, advent calendars were going through their chocolate phase but that, I have to tell you, is now old hat. You can get all sorts of advent calendars. A choir member had a teabag selection advent calendar, though I gather it had a small design defect in that the tea bags tended to fall down behind the front board, and when she opened the last door to reveal the baby Jesus teabag, he had gone. We shall never know whether he was mint and licorice or all-day energy boost.

Just listen to this:

'Try not to hyperventilate, but the Jo Malone advent calendar has been revealed and it's every bit as beautiful as you can imagine. With 24 doors, containing 24 Jo Malone products including candles, perfume and body products, you'll never want December to end'. (£300)

'If you really want to splurge this year and you're obsessed with skincare, Dr.Barbara Sturm has released the ultimate calendar that'll have you glowing in no time. With hyaluronic and anti-ageing serums, facial scrubs, ampoules, enzyme cleansers and eye creams, it's a great investment buy for those looking to upgrade their beauty routine'. (£474)

'Explore charlotte's world of makeup and skincare. Discover a different treat behind each door. May all your beauty dreams come true'.

Charlotte, Jo and Dr B are all set to give us the ultimate gift. Not exactly a gift – Dr B wanted us to fork out £474 for access to her ampoules. But 'all your dreams come true' suggests the fairy tale which marketing has made of the

Christmas story – the dream of a radiant and wrinkle-free complexion – a poor stand-in for Christ's promise of life in all its fullness.

Turn now to another woman's concept of what lies behind the little door. Frances Chesterton was the wife, business manager and amanuensis of her much more famous husband, G K, whose estate must still be making money from the royalties on the TV version of his Father Brown stories. Today, Frances is little known or regarded as a poet. In her day, she wrote a poem every Christmas for use in her Christmas cards to friends, and she published four slim volumes. But the words of the poem which Howells chose to use for today's anthem bring up some extraordinary, troubling and ambiguous images, and show her to be not merely a lady dabbler in Christmas card doggerel.

The poem, whose central image is the door, is all about gifts: both giving them and receiving them. One phrase strikes me in particular: 'We need not wander more'. The Magi, as T S Eliot was later more famously to describe, have reached a place which feels like belonging, and here they must open the door which is in front of them. They offer their precious gifts to the child who 'stirs not in his sleep'. But the gift is for them as well: a keen-edged sword; smoke of battle red; myrrh for the honoured, happy dead; gifts for his children, terrible and sweet.

The anthem is made more striking by its date: Christmas 1918. A time when probably even those who didn't usually pray were giving thanks for the end of the great slaughter of the First World War. That Christmas was marked for many families by loss rather than by a gift. For my own family, there were gifts which emerged from the horror. Sometime in late 1918 a door opened to release my maternal grandfather from a prisoner of war camp in northern Germany. My mother's birth in 1919, the fourth of his thirteen children, was the gift which followed. For Frances Chesterton, in an age of numerous families, the theme of the gift of a child must have caused pain every year. She and her husband had a loving marriage and yearned for a large family – sadly, a gift which was denied them, as they remained childless.

For all mothers Christmas is a poignant time. The birth of a child of one's own is the biggest gift life has to offer. My son Graeme's birthday is the 27th of November, exactly four weeks from Christmas Day. Shortly before he was born, there was a magnitude 8 earthquake in Mexico City which killed at least 5,000 people – probably many more, and significantly more than those killed on 9/11. At the time the news made Mexico the focus of every news bulletin, but few of us remember it now. How quickly the doors of our memory close on the earth-shattering disasters of others. One of the main buildings to be affected in the earthquake was a maternity hospital, which collapsed on top of its occupants. Pulled from the rubble seven days after the event were several newborn babies. It is not known how they survived. As chance would have it, one of them is called Jesús Francisco.

Frances Chesterton was aware that what we find behind the last door of the advent calendar is not an easy gift. Not merely that having a baby is a very tough experience in itself – without the need to do it on a pile of scratchy straw in a freezing stable – but not every child is the pink-cheeked cherub of my childhood advent calendar, or has the future we would wish for our own children. Some are loved and welcomed like Elinor Teifi Collins, the most recent baby of a Robinson choir marriage, born on 28 January. But others are visited by violence and tragedy like Jesús Francisco, rescued by some miracle from under the rubble of a building and Syrian baby Alan Kurdi, lying drowned on a Turkish beach in 2015, and photographed for the horror and shame of the world in the arms of a distressed rescue worker.

But to end more cheerfully with some door-related stories from my own life. As an eighteen-year-old (no longer with plaits) I ventured one day under the Porters' Lodge arch of the imposing Waterhouse building that is Girton College, for my interview for a place to read Spanish and French. I had done the maths: 300 applicants; 30 interviewees; six

places. The first in my family of many cousins to even think of applying to university, I seized the large brass handle of the door. It came off in my hand. Thankfully, instead of taking it as an omen, I somehow screwed it back on and was able to open the door, and even more thankfully I was chosen as one of the six – news communicated in those days by an overnight telegram. A gift indeed.

On January 16th 2000 I came through that door to audition for a place in Robinson Choir. I remember that my audition was conducted on the harpsichord, as the Steinway was locked and covered and the rehearsal piano was waiting to be tuned. Playing the piano was the junior organ scholar who is now the uncle of Elinor Teifi, mentioned above. I think they were desperate, because I got the job and have managed so far not to do anything to make them fire me.

At my first evensong I was told, seconds before the start of the service, those words which choristers dread, 'By the way, you're leading in'. I can't quite remember the mechanics of it, but I also led out at the end of the service. In those days, Jacqueline Stieger's beautiful bronze gate, known as 'The Vine of Life' was closed behind us after we had entered the chapel, and it was therefore my job to throw it open as we all made our exit. There was something joyful about that action, throwing aside a screen of twining plants to re-emerge into the real world. For some reason it always reminded me of the ending of the Latin Mass, 'Ite, missa est'. Go, it has been sent.

These are all gifts – some of them large, some so small they are just a little glowing memory which I carry with me. My last door anecdote is one such: it is the story of Jack, to whom I briefly taught Spanish when he was eleven years old. I would come round the corner at 8.40 a.m. to find Jack's class restlessly waiting to be let in to the classroom. Jack was always first in line. As my arms were always full of laptop, planner, and books he would take my bunch of keys from me, get the door key – he knew exactly how to find it – and open the door and they would all pile in to receive from me the gift of a lesson on radical-changing verbs. The thing is, Jack was profoundly deaf. He had recently been given a cochlear implant, so struggled daily to make sense of the welter of new sounds which his brain was receiving via his skull, converted into a sounding board by the device. I'm not sure what the gift of education did for Jack. I gather that his behaviour went downhill in later years. But I remember him every time I search for my key in the bunch and open my front door. His gift to me.

There are many doors which life requires us to open, and many gifts are offered to us. Some of them are enormous and significant. Some are small and hard to recognise. Lord give us the insight to know that there is no need to wander more, that we have found the little door. Give us the courage to open the door, the wisdom to recognise the gift, and the patience and faith to value it and to live with it a life in all its fullness, whether it is terrible or sweet.

Tim Atkin

The Narrow Door

17th February 2019

“But he will reply, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!’

“There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out.”

The door is narrow.

These verses are very troubling. The people have followed Christ, eaten with him, followed his teachings, but are denied paradise in the most cruel way – they can see everyone inside at the heavenly cocktail party, but are turned away at the door. Undesirables, unworthy sinners.

The door is narrow.

Forgive a medievalist his medievalism, but let me tell you a story. This story was told often in the fens a thousand years ago. The great world tree Ygdrassil’s upper branches cradle the castle of the Aesir, its roots reaching deep into the Well of Urd, from where all the secrets of the cosmos spring, trickling out into all the nine worlds. Such secrets are communicated to the Aesir in the bark of the tree Ygdrassil, which twists into magical and powerful shapes called runes.

The door is narrow.

Woden was a great seeker of knowledge, and coveted the secrets of the most powerful runes, which reveal deep truths, even of life and death. He climbed the gnarled and mighty branches of the tree Ygdrassil, and deftly fashioned a noose from hempen rope. He slung it around his neck, and hanged himself from the tree. Dangling above the World Pool below, he pierced his flank with a spear, and a thin stream of blood flowed into the sacred waters.

The door is narrow.

For nine days and nights Woden remained in this state, one foot in the land of the living, the other in the land of the dead. His one eye watched the waters intently, searching for any sign of the runes of power. On the tenth day, his sacrifice – himself unto himself – was recognised by the churning waters, which spun in streams and eddies, revealing at last the great mysteries of the nine worlds. Woden became the mightiest of the Aesir, capable of healing all wounds of the body and soul. The seed of knowledge had taken root in his skull.

The door is narrow.

A thousand years ago, this ancient myth was already being replaced by the history of a different sacrifice – the man who hung from a different tree, his flank pierced by Roman steel, returning nevertheless from the doors of death – and the convenience of the similarities in the two stories was exploited by missionaries to Britain and Scandinavia in converting the Saxons and Vikings. King Harold's, clad in a magnificent helm decorated in the dragons and boars that represented the old gods, was defeated in 1066. This caused fear and trembling amongst those remaining Anglo-Saxons who still held the gods of the old house. Why had Woden, who had passed through the door of death, and returned with knowledge and power, deserted them and their lands in their darkest hour?

The door is narrow.

The Norman forces marched under the banner of the Bishop of Rome, the crucifix like a sniper's crosshair held over England, and the devastation, pillage and ravaging of the country is one that is strangely forgotten in the classroom. William the Bastard is one of any number of warmongers who have used the emblem of Christ to justify their evil actions. We do not need to look back so far in history to find more examples of such behaviour. Christ went through the door, and came back stronger. If we follow him, surely we must be justified in our lives, and guaranteed a seat in the stadium of the afterlife? I was once told by a student that it was his mission to free people from the fear of death, because Christ had already given him, at the tender age of 20, certain knowledge of his place in Heaven. As far as I am aware, he had not been crucified or hanged himself from any trees lately.

The door is narrow.

To pass through that door, what must we do? Why don't we read those verses in Luke from a different perspective. The sinners outside the door, wailing to be let in, are convinced they deserve the rewards they imagine on the other side. All their lives they have spoken words of faith and obedience, sworn allegiance to God, and perhaps even lived good lives. The passage, at least, suggests as much. What do they receive instead? Agony, exile, exclusion. Is this akin to the caprice and cruelty of the Old Testament God, who demanded allegiance from his subjects – like Job – even through the most horrendous divine punishments? But isn't this a rather fitting moral exemplum, a contrapasso – or appropriate punishment? Such a moment of darkness, of doubt, is something these people had never experienced before. They had never – like Christ – experienced pain, but instead waited patiently for their assured place in Heaven, their days filled with contentment and pride in their faithfulness. Waiting, staring at the door, waiting for the handle to turn.

But the door is narrow.

I would like to close with some more contemporary words. Thomas Pynchon's mad, cataclysmic, but strangely prophetic novella "The Crying of Lot 49".

"The Saint whose water can light lamps, the clairvoyant whose lapse in recall is the breath of God, the true paranoid for whom all is organized in spheres joyful or threatening about the central pulse of himself, the dreamer whose puns probe ancient fetid shafts and tunnels of truth alla ct in the same special relevance to the word, or whatever it is the word is there, buffering, to protect us from. The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending on where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost."

On this side of the door, the sound of weeping bounces off the walls, the wind blows cold through the hawthorn, and we speak words, as one humanity, one voice, separated only by time, a voice that speaks in unison, spilling, echoing out into the darkness.

There is a light at the foot of the door. The door is closed. The door is narrow.

Dr Simon Perry

Ask, Seek, Knock

3rd March 2019

This evening we continue our theme on 'doors' with the notion of prayer.

The trouble is, whenever you begin to discuss prayer, the biblical dynamic of prayer is buried beneath centuries of bizarre church practices that enter the popular mindset and distort people's notions about prayer. The most obvious example is the idea that when you pray, you put your hands together and close your eyes. The idea is based on the kind of petitions you would make to your superiors in an honour/shame culture – and since God is your superior, you should come before him like a peasant would come before a feudal lord. Grovelling, snivelling, declaring oneself an unworthy, miserable, wretched sinner – walking into church like something God has just wiped off his shoe.

But the earliest pictures of Christians at prayer, found in early tombs across the Roman world, saw them not bowed down, hands together, eyes closed – but stood up, eyes wide open with the palms of their hands facing up. I suppose the expression would be 'jazz hands.' Confession was not some snivelling liturgical apology for being mortally naughty, a spiritual act you had to perform at the beginning of the church service, so you could wipe clean your moral slate – and get on with worship! No - Confession was simply an attempt to tell the truth about how things are – an acknowledgement of who God is to you, entailing a public commitment to make that declaration with your life as well as your mouth.

Some of you will remember a story I've told here before, which is particularly relevant when considering the Lord's prayer. When I was young I was in the scouts. And in the scouting movement there is a clear hierarchy. At the bottom, you have the scout, then the assistant patrol leader, then the patrol leader, then the scout leaders, then the scout master – but way up there at the top of the tree was The Group Scout Leader. And our Group Scout Leader was a terrifying figure. He frightened everyone- and when I say everyone, I include the scout leaders and the scout master. But when we were camping, and I was away from home, and cold and wet and missing my mum – I didn't go and speak to the patrol leaders, or the scout leaders or the scout master – I went straight to this terrifying figure at the top of the tree. And I guess the question is why? And the answer is quite simple. He was my dad.

So prayer was never about banging on heaven's door, in the hope that eventually an angry and frightening God could be conned into doing cool stuff for you. No – today's reading concludes with the promise, 'Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you.'

That doesn't mean, of course, that you have unrestricted access to the almighty – whom you can approach with your shopping list of things you want him to do for you – regardless of what they are. My favourite example of this kind of prayer is one uttered by John Ward of Hackney, in the 18th Century:

O Lord, thou knowest that I have nine estates in the City of London, and likewise that I have lately purchased one estate in fee simple in the county of Essex; I beseech thee to preserve the two counties of Essex and Middlesex from fire and earthquake; and as I have a mortgage in Hertford-shire, I beg of thee likewise to have an eye of compassion on that county; and for the rest of the counties thou mayest deal with them as thou art pleased.

O Lord, enable the bank to answer their bills, and make all my debtors good men. Give a prosperous voyage and return to the Mermaid ship, because I have insured it; and as thou hast said that the days of the wicked are but short, I trust in thee, that thou wilt not forget thy promise, as I have purchased an estate in reversion which will be mine on the death of that profligate young man, Sir Jonas Lloyd.

Keep my friends from sinking, and preserve me from thieves and house breakers, and make all my servants so honest and faithful that they may attend to my interests, and never cheat me out of my property, night or day.

Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you.

Surely, that sounds like an open promise to waltz up to God's front door and make stupid, self-centred demands. No, the story Jesus gave about prayer offers a very different picture. The scene is a peasant dwelling, in an impoverished corner, of an unimportant province of the Roman empire. And in such settings, economics was based upon mutual favours, that could earn you credit – and favours you owed to others, which would amass debt. Now the friend in this situation technically means nothing more than your social equal, a pagan category that refers to nothing more than someone who shares your social and economic status – so there is a request, and the request is refused. I'm already in bed, my kids are in bed, go away. Sharing someone's status – as friend – is no guarantee that you will get what you want when you go asking, seeking, knocking.

But the friend with the bread does respond – with a motivation other than the robotic demands of friendship. The word describing his motives for getting up and giving him whatever he wants, though, is notoriously difficult to translate. It probably doesn't mean persistence though, as though you have to go banging on God's door until you get on his nerves to the point where he grants your request or throws a thunderbolt at you so he can go back to sleep. But more probably, the word refers to a total lack of shame, shamelessness, refusing to recognise the conventional rules for how you're supposed to behave.

In other words, the friend with the bread – gets up not because his social equal has made a request – instead he gets up because he has no respect at all for the entire social hierarchy, no respect for the pagan category of friendship, and because he rejects the entire economic system based upon you-scratch-my-back-and-I'll-scratch-yours. The friend gives what is requested, because he is motivated by an alternative moral code – need.

The conclusion Jesus reaches is that this is how God functions. There are no recognised hierarchies, no social status, no conventions of economics that God respects. There are no humps to jump through. No wiping clean your moral slate. No appeal to some authority, which God must respect. No. God is shameless – he does not respect the hierarchies of an honour shame culture. No complicated procedure for approaching God. Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you.

Of course, it doesn't mean that you can ask for anything. 'Dear God, can I have a new Porsche, please?' 'No you can't'. – that's an answer to prayer. But the context in Luke presupposes that those who pray have not come to God with a shopping list – but that they are asking for the Holy Spirit. Their prayer is based upon the desire to align their lives with his – and that is literal meaning of confession. The prayer for the Holy Spirit, is the prayer to become a means by which God becomes present to you, and to others through you.

Those of you who listen well, will have noticed that in the Lord's Prayer – we often pray 'hallowed be thy name', may your name be honoured, regarded as Holy. And the reading from Ezekiel highlights precisely this dimension of God's sense of shame. No, God does not recognise or respect the demands of an honour shame culture. But there is a concern to safeguard the honour of God's holy name. And as Ezekiel saw clearly enough, if the plight of Israel is a terrible, beleaguered, belittled plight because the nation has been defeated, downtrodden and deported, that does not reflect well upon God. So that when God acts to benefit Israel, he emphasises – it is not for your sake, but for the sake of my holy name.

I wonder what you might make of that, given the current climate of our world today. Now that we live in a context in which it is easy to look to the future with a sense of despair? We see the quality of political discourse constantly eroded. The accusations of fake news being used as a get out clause from facing reality. Those accusations themselves, spawned by a mainstream media that has quietly and grossly and often deliberately misrepresented to the world to shape the opinions of people. Where is the God, whom we call 'Father' who promised to send his Holy Spirit, the Spirit of communication?

One of the great examples of this is the rhetorical strategy of gish-gallop: that is, if there is a political or popular figure who poses a threat to the interests of those with power – you don't just say, 'Hey, that person is terrible because they are making life uncomfortable for those of us who are benefitting from an unjust system.' No – instead, you flood the media with repeated, unsubstantiated, vaguely generalised character assassinations – and you do it in the form of soundbites. And it doesn't matter if those accusations are true. Because in order to defend against misleading accusations, you cannot use soundbites. But in order to attack those who threaten an unjust status quo, soundbites are all you need. And in the era of Twitter, soundbites are more convincing than complex defences. Gish gallop. It is very effective. It is one of the strategies adopted by entities associated with Cambridge Analytica – and since they were based right here, I presume you've already given serious thought to all this. So I don't want to teach you to such eggs. But asking for the Holy Spirit, is asking for discernment, it is asking to be shaped by someone and something other than the quiet ideologies imposed upon us – at the same time as convincing us to believe we are all free thinkers, and that ideologies are those things that only affect other people.

To pray to a Father, is consciously and deliberately to revolve our ideology, to the God who is in the business of answering prayer.

Finally, I am conscious that the church has always offered a home for those who remain gloriously unsure about the existence of God. And I think it's fair to say that of course the god does not exist in the same way that a mountain exists, or a bag of frozen carrots exists, or the Right Honorable Nicolas Clegg arguably exists. I'm reminded of a story about the Danish physicist Neils Bohr. Apparently, a friend visited his house one day and saw that he kept a horse shoe on the front of his house – the symbol that is supposed to bring good luck. And his friend asked him, "Hey, famous physicist Niels Bohr, why would you of all people keep a horseshoe on your house, – surely you don't believe it brings you good luck?" And Neils Bohr replied, "No – of course I don't believe in it, but I have it there because I'm told it works even if you don't believe in it."

All this, to say that there are no ideological or mental barriers that separate God from those who approach him. There is a door that will be opened.

There are no cultural barriers, that render God accessible only to white middle aged men aged 18-55. Just a door that will be opened.

There are no liturgical barriers, that require you to be morally cleansed prior to asking him for stuff. There is simply a door a that will be opened.

There is no procedure, no back stage pass, no means of leverage.

Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened.

Lent Meditations

Rev Dr Simon Perry

10th March 2019

Forty days and forty nights

Luke 4:1-13

For forty days, Jesus had been fasting in the wastelands of Judea.

The devil tested him. He did not 'tempt' him. The devil tested him. Because the devil wanted a Messiah who was fit for purpose.

He tested Jesus like a warrior tests his weapons, to make sure they can be relied upon.

The devil wanted a Messiah he could rely upon:

A Messiah he could rely upon to prioritise his own needs, to use his power to satisfy his own appetite:

'Since you are the Son of god, tell this stone to become bread!'

A Messiah he could rely upon to seize power, so that he could use that power for good: 'Become my client, and all this power will be yours.'

A Messiah he could rely upon to invoke divine protection without question.

'Throw yourself from roof of the Temple, God will protect you that's his business.'

Jesus could not be relied upon.

Should the Son of God prioritize his own appetite? 'Man does not live on bread alone...' Jesus replied, leaving the devil to complete the sentence, '... but by everything that proceeds from the mouth of God.'

Should the Son of God piggy-back on the popular power of the day in order to exert influence? 'You shall serve only God', Jesus replied. Secular power is not a prerequisite for doing God's will on earth.

Should the Son of God always assume God was on his side, regardless of what he did? 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test,' Jesus replied.

The devil had just put the Son of God to the test.

And the Son of God failed the test.

He was useless in aiding the devil to achieve the devil's goals.

In tests like these, Christian communities have often achieved much better results.

Take up your cross

Luke 14:25-35

A generation ago, two gunmen ran into a church, pointed their Kalashnikovs at the congregation, and shouted, 'If you're not a Christian, get out!' About two thirds of the congregation hurried out of the church. The intruders put down their guns, and said to the pastor, 'Now – we can worship God properly!' Liturgically, it was an eloquent call to worship, because the Christ they worshipped had said, 'you cannot be my disciple unless you take up your cross.'

You cannot understand Jesus from a safe distance.

Those who carried their cross had been condemned to execution.

They were carrying the cross bar, which would be hoisted onto the vertical wooden stake on which they would die.

Those who carried the cross were condemned criminals.

They were unsuccessful rebels, failed revolutionaries.

Their property, their inheritance, their legacy, and even their name, was taken from them and given to the state against which they had rebelled.

They were dead men walking. Or women. The cross did not discriminate: rich and poor; young and old, Jew and gentile, it took them all to the same place. It was ruthlessly egalitarian.

When you carry your cross, everything you have is forfeit. Everything you love is lost.

When you carry your cross, all your smug certainties evaporate.

Your real priorities are revealed for what they are. And so are those of other people.

When you carry your cross, you have nothing left, and you can see clearly. You can see clearly enough to learn.

Jesus said you cannot be my disciple, unless you take up your cross.

You cannot understand Jesus from a safe distance.

No matter how sound your theology. No matter how insightful are your instincts or how sharp your intellect, you cannot understand Jesus from a safe distance.

Paradise

Luke 23:32-48

Paradise is a long, long way from the cross.

Paradise was the walled garden of the Persian kings. It was their oasis, the place they would host their most privileged guests. To be in paradise, was to be welcomed into the company of the most powerful figure.

Jesus and two other criminals were nailed to their crosses, dying. They had been excluded and condemned. They were the official outsiders: naked and shamed. Visible to all, they became living examples of the fate of non-compliance. It was a long way from the cross, to Paradise.

But Jesus spoke of Paradise from the cross. He did not speak of Paradise merely to offer comfort, merely to ease the pain of his companions, with thoughts of the blissful afterlife that awaited.

To be on the cross, is to be the ultimate outsider: excluded, banished, condemned. To be in paradise, is to be the ultimate insider: welcome, privileged, honoured.

Paradise is a long way from the cross, but the cross is the only way to get there.

Not because Christianity is the only way to heaven, so anyone who claims to be Christian is guaranteed a place in Paradise.

Not because we all have our cross to bear, because life is hard for everyone so you deserve to go to heaven when you die.

The cross is the only route to Paradise, because – one way or another – the crucifixion is the fate of those who serve this kind of Lord:

To follow this Jesus might mean to speak with a voice that can lose you friends and gain you enemies.

To follow this Jesus might mean to threaten those in power, and to face the consequences.

To follow this Jesus might lead you to forsake all you have, to learn that 'sacrifice' can be an actual experience, to take up your cross.

The way of the cross is the only route to Paradise.

But Paradise is a long, long way from the cross.