

21st Sunday of Ordinary Time 2019
Mthr Melanie Clark

Luke 13: 22-30

A door is a powerful image. A symbol of both opportunity and imprisonment. Of access and liberty: offered or denied.

Open, it is a liminal space of entrance and exit. The boundary of beginnings and endings.

Narrow, the diminishing opportunity to leave or enter. It can suggest a sense of urgency, of a need for response.

Closed, it can mean lost freedom, lost chance for escape, or, on the flip side, relief and safety.

It all depends on what is behind it.

In art, literature and film the door is usually the entrance into something – a beginning rather than an ending. The iconic wardrobe doors of *The Lion The Witch and the Wardrobe*, for example, led to a different world through the fur coats into

the winter woods of Narnia. In the Wizard of Oz, it is surely an unforgettable moment in cinema, when Dorothy opens the door to her house, and the world is transformed from sepia to technicolour as she steps through from her Kansas farmhouse into Munchkinland.

Then there is Holman Hunt's painting 'The Light of the World' which hangs in the side chapel of Keble College, where we sojourned two summers ago. Christ stands holding a lantern at a door. The door represents the human soul, which cannot be opened from the outside. There is no handle on the door, and the rusty nails and hinges, overgrown with ivy, denote that it has never been opened and that the figure of Christ is asking for permission to enter. The writing under the picture is taken from Revelation 3: 'Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.'

+++

In our gospel reading this morning, the door begins narrowly ajar, but very quickly it is shut. It is an answer in parable to the central question of the passage:

‘Lord, will those who are saved be few?’

It is clear from the offset that Luke is using this passage as an opportunity to gather up in a summary the demands for access to the kingdom of God. What Jesus says here has already been said using different images.

This passage, with its image of the door, and summary of who will gain access to the kingdom, casts a sense of urgency. The narrow door is closing. The closed door is an eschatological moment. There is a time limit. The moment had passed for entering the kingdom. God’s purpose moves towards the eschaton. When the door is closed it is closed.

+++

It is easy, perhaps especially for cradle Anglicans, not to share Luke's sense of urgency. After all, two thousand years have gone by since Luke wrote his gospel, and the door seems to remain open. And for most of us, many years too have passed since our baptisms, whether as infants or as adults, and our vows are a vague memory. To be sure, the doors of the Church are always open to us: at Mary Mag's more literally so than in most places, what with your fifteen masses a week. But it is not the doors of the Church or, indeed, the kingdom of heaven that are at risk of being rust shut from underuse. It is ours, the doors to our hearts.

But ... 'Lord, will those who are saved be few?'

The question is phrased abstractly, like asking about the population of Lichfield or the number of QPR fans there are. Just the facts, Lord. But the answer Jesus gives is personal; he looks the questioner in the eye and says "I tell *you*". Many will be saved, not just Israel's ancient faithful, but Gentiles too, people from from east and west, and from north and south, people you would least expect in your wildest

dreams to be let in,.... But not you. I do not know where you come from. You who eat and drink in the real presence of God incarnate, are left outside at the last. No you cannot enter: depart.

The feeling is agonising, of lost opportunity and regret, ...there is much wailing and gnashing of teeth.

‘Some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last’. Jesus is saying that our assumptions about what gains us access to the kingdom of God are wrong. Perhaps then, those whom Jesus describes as being denied access have been shut out by the own perceptions – by what they believed would let them in. They expected to be let in, they were complacent, they lost focus, they had no sense of urgency, and before they knew it, the door was shut.

In a less enlightened age, Christians used to assume that passages like this were about the Jews, who had become complacent as the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But such hubris is dangerous. Luke is clear in his warning. It is not enough to say that we know

Christ and have heard his teaching, even to eat and drink with him. This passage warns against complacency, assumption and self-sufficiency. The Kingdom is not open to those who think they have everything and need no help.

But ... 'Lord, will those who are saved be few?'

But Jesus is not the Office of National Statistics. Salvation is not for counting. Admittance to the kingdom of God is available to everyone through God's grace. The kingdom is radical and outrageous in its hospitality. All are welcome. But we have to accept the invitation, not just by saying we know Christ and his teaching, but truly believing it and living it out in our daily lives with urgency. Strive, he says, to enter.

We are so worried these days about being accused of old heresies, of Pelagianism in particular, home grown on British soil in the 4th century. But even Augustine, the great anti-Pelagian, understood grace as something to be accepted by us and internalised in our souls to be truly received.

Augustine's analogy of the church reflects this reciprocal understanding of Grace. The church to Augustine was a hospital full of sick people. Christians are those who recognize that they are ill, and seek the assistance of a physician, in order that they may be healed.

We have to recognize our illness and seek the help of the physician. We cannot believe we are self sufficient. We cannot be complacent.

We have to recognize ourselves, our own fragile, broken, sick, vulnerable, messed up, surely last in the queue for the kingdom – selves, in order to let God in, and thus let ourselves into the kingdom.

Perhaps the door that prevents us from getting into the kingdom of God *is* our own door. The door to our soul. It is just how Holman Hunt's 'Light of the World' tells it. The door in the painting represents the human soul, rusty, overgrown with ivy, never opened and cannot be opened from the outside. Christ is asking for permission to enter. 'Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the

door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.' To share at Christ's table in the kingdom of God, means letting Him through the door into our soul. But this is a narrow, rusty, doorway before it is closed forever. We must strive with a sense of urgency to let Christ live in us and we in Him. There is no time for complacency or telling ourselves we're not in dire need of grace. God's purpose moves towards the eschaton. We must listen for the knock, and rush to the door to open it wide, every - single - day. We open the door and let the kingdom in by practising its radical, outrageous love in our lives.

No you cannot enter because, 'We do not know you here'.

We do not know you, because you have not let us in.