

I Am the Gate

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[0 : 00] When we think of the teaching of Jesus, in some places it's more obvious in its meaning and just easier to understand than it is in others.

So for example, when he says something like, blessed are the peacemakers, or do to others as you would have them do to you, we get that.

It makes sense. Of course it might not be so easy to actually do, but it's certainly not difficult to understand. But then there are other things that Jesus said that are a bit more puzzling.

And the one that we're thinking of today is an example of that. But Jesus said, I am the gate, or as some translations put it, I am the door.

So what's that about? Well it's not just any gate or door. Jesus is talking about sheep folds. He's using imagery that to his first listeners was part of everyday experience.

[1 : 06] Not every first century Galilean was a shepherd, but flocks were often owned communally. And of course, even if you weren't personally responsible for taking care of sheep, you couldn't not notice the presence of sheep and the way that they were taken care of when you lived in a small rural village that was surrounded by fields.

Now there are two types of sheep fold. First there was the larger kind, where village flocks were returned for shelter at night time.

These were protected by large gates or doors. And this is what Jesus is probably referring to in verse 3 of our reading when he says that the watchman opens the gate.

It's an image of security. Simply, Jesus is saying that he opens that up to us and for us. If we're looking for a place where we will be kept safe forever, well he's the one who takes us there.

That's the message of cross and resurrection. However successful we might be in life, every one of us eventually hits the wall.

[2 : 22] We all die. The gospel tells us that the only way through that wall is for God to reach out to us from the other side. And that is what happens in Christ.

God comes to us in Jesus, lives a human life and then enters death itself. And in so doing, breaks its power. We all still die, but we can now face it as one approaches an open door.

Held open by the risen Jesus himself. He knows our voice and we can know his. Now many people go through life terrified of death, perhaps denying it or avoiding talking about it, because they see it only as a hopeless end.

But with Jesus you can see it as an endless hope. The door is open. When we can see death in this way, it means we can live our lives in a very different way.

Rather than a journey to an end, it's a journey that always has the best still to come. That's why Paul talks of hope as the one of the three great theological virtues alongside love and faith.

[3 : 38] As one writer put it, these are like three sisters. Two of them are grown and the other is a small child. And they go forward together, hand in hand, with the child hope in the middle.

Looking at them, it would seem that the bigger ones are pulling the child. But it is the other way around. It is the little girl who is pulling the two bigger ones.

It is hope that pulls faith and love. Without hope, everything would stop. So hope pulls us through our lives, always moving forward, because we see at the end of it an open door, held open by Jesus Christ, leading through to everlasting life.

Now that in itself is quite a big deal. But Jesus doesn't leave it there. In fact, he goes way, way further. He doesn't just say, I know you spend your whole life searching for security.

So here it is. Here's the door to that place. No, he says, I am that door. I am that gate. You see, New Testament scholars say that when Jesus says, I am the gate, the gate, he is talking about a smaller kind of sheepfold that was used when the flocks were kept on the hillside at night during the

warmer seasons.

[5 : 08] These enclosures were just walled areas with an opening through which the sheep came and went. There was no actual door.

So at night time, the shepherd would lay across the opening. The shepherd quite literally was the gate.

There was no access except through them. Now think about that. Jesus is saying that he not only gives us salvation and security, but that he is salvation and security.

This gate looks quite different to the sort of gate that Jesus is describing. But let's not worry about that.

The point is, it's a gate. It's a thing. It's an object. It's inanimate. Now, it's a very nice gate, but it serves its function. But at the end of the day, it's not a living thing.

[6 : 08] There's nothing personal about this gate. Sadly, that's how a lot of people think about God. They believe God exists as some kind of reality.

They talk to that God and possibly even try listening as well. In fact, their belief can be a very strong one, such that it provides a pretty robust moral compass for them, which shapes their choices and navigates them through life in such a way that they would possibly even say that God is not only real, but can and should be trusted.

But for all that, it's still not quite what we see in Jesus. Because it's possible to believe all those things about God and yet still relate to God as an it, as a thing, as a higher power that is real, but distant and impersonal.

Jesus doesn't just say, I am the opener of the gate, but I am the gate. He's personal. He's living. He's living.

And that's how we are to relate to God as the one who not only saves us forever, but who loves us forever. And you know what? I think there's something in there which reminds us of something very important about what it means to be the church.

[7 : 40] You see, just as the gospel challenges the idea that God is an impersonal thing, so it also challenges the idea that the church should ever be some impersonal thing.

The church needs that challenge because it has that terrible habit of degenerating into an institution or worse still, being seen as just a building.

Jesus shows us that God is to be known and loved as a living, personal being, and he calls us to be the church as a living, personal family.

Jesus shows us, and he calls us to be the church, and the people, and we're not to be the church that's called the church. Now, I know we like to say, well, of course, the church is the people and not the building. But the experience of building closure as part of the Covid lockdown exposes some really important things about our attitudes to church buildings.

Jude Levermore, who is the head of mission for the UK Methodist Church, recently wrote this. As we begin to think about going back into our buildings, I'm hopeful that we will take time to consider what we have learned from being out of them.

[9 : 00] I'm hopeful that we will have solidified our understanding that church is not a building.

We teach that to our children, but do we hold that in our hearts? I'm praying that as we share a roadmap for leaving lockdown, with all its needful risk assessments and procedures, we will guard against entering another lockdown, that of being so caught up in our buildings that we miss the opportunities to be church without them.

Whatever the future looks like exactly over these coming weeks and months, whatever happens with COVID, with lockdown and with our church buildings, remember this.

Just as God would have us know that he is living, personal and calls us to enter through that gate, into an everlasting, ever closer and ever deepening relationship with him.

As church, that's precisely what we're called to be about. To be a living, outward looking people who stop at nothing to help others find that gate.