

ALL AGE - Enter the Narrow Door

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Date: 10 September 2006

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[0 : 00] Well, growing up in Melbourne, no summer holidays were complete without the footage on the TV news of the Maya Stocktake sale opening.

I never went to one because I think Mum wanted to keep us all in one piece, but I just used to marvel at the images on the news, imagining what it would have been like to be there in Bourke Street on that day when people were queuing for hours outside the store waiting for it to open, waiting for that poor old shop assistant to come and very carefully open the door so everyone could rush in and shove each other, jostling, trying to make it to that fridge that was marked down to \$100 or something and that TV that was marked down to \$20, you know, only one that was hidden somewhere in the store.

It was just the chaos, the danger, the sheer consuming or consumer passion that was written on the faces of all who entered.

It was an institution, wasn't it? I think in these days of occupational health and safety, they can't really incite that kind of fervour. But back then, for those outside Maya on that morning after Christmas, it was everything to get through that door.

Well, today as we continue our sermon series on chapter 13 and 14 of Luke's Gospel, we're also confronted with the image of a door, a door which people must strive to enter.

[1 : 36] The image confronts us as Jesus responds to a question that had been fomenting in the minds of religious Jews in the first century. For the most part, from what we can read of the writings of the day, most religious thinkers were convinced that the majority of Jewish people, the majority of the Jewish nation at that time would be saved, with perhaps some exceptions for those who completely and consciously rejected the law or lived a life of rebellion.

But generally, being a national Jew, a son of Abraham, was considered a guaranteed ticket to sit at the heavenly banquet.

So really, when the question was asked, Lord, will only a few be saved? It was a theoretical question for the national Jew, a question stirred up, I guess, by some of Jesus' talk about judgment, about the end times.

But it was probably asked by someone whose very cultural associations meant that they themselves were confident that they were in the number. Well, as he so often does, Jesus answers the question that should have been asked, rather than the one that was.

He won't give numbers or dates simply to satisfy human curiosity. Instead, he effectively personalises the issue, changing the question from, will the saved be few, to, will the saved be you?

[3 : 18] He addresses the one who asks the question and all who listen to the words, because he uses the plural in his imperative. And we read in verses 24, When you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, Lord, open to us, then in reply he will say to you, I do not know where you come from.

Then you will begin to say, We ate and drank with you and you toured in our streets. But he will say, I do not know where you come from. Go away from me, all you evildoers.

Well, it might not have been the answer that the man was hoping for, but it is an answer that cannot be ignored. The theoretical has become the personal.

And Jesus has painted this powerful and really explosive picture of the kingdom of God as a house with a door that, one, can be entered only by effort and focus, two, a door that is narrow, that has clearly defined boundaries, three, a door that will not be open forever, and four, a door that will eventually shut people out from the house of the kingdom.

These four challenges are joined then by a fifth challenge, which identifies the narrow door with being known by the owner of the house, Jesus Christ.

[4 : 58] So let's look at these in turn. Firstly, entry into the house requires effort and focus. Jesus commands his questioner and all who listen to strive to enter.

In the Greek, this word strive is where we get our word to agonise. It's a strong, almost aggressive word. It's about commitment.

The NIV translates it as to make every effort. And in its day, it was a concept particularly at home in the sporting arena, where it depicted the idea of an athlete striving toward the prize, exerting himself in a race, disciplining himself in training for the goal.

And so in this picture, in Luke 13, the first explosive challenge to Jesus' hearers is that entry into the house of the kingdom is not an easy thing.

It can't be taken as a given. You can't just stroll in. You won't just accidentally find yourself in there. God provides and opens the door of his own gracious initiative, yes, but it takes conscious, intentional effort on people's part to enter through it.

[6 : 23] To enter God's kingdom, we need to be ready for a struggle, for exertion, for discipline, for concentration, for sacrificial decisions, for an intestinal fortitude, if you like, that says, I know what I need and I will get there no matter what it costs me.

So Jesus says, if you want the saved to be you, you must orient your whole life, all your energy, toward this aim. Secondly then, Jesus declares that the entryway into the kingdom not only requires personal decision and effort, but it requires personal decision and effort directed to the right thing. It is a narrow door. It doesn't matter how sincere you are in your spirituality. It doesn't matter how devoted you are to another religion.

If the way you seek to enter God's heavenly kingdom is not within the boundaries that God himself has set, then you will not be able to enter. It is a narrow door.

Jesus will define what those boundaries are as we go further into the story, but now he says, if you want the saved to be you, it is a narrow way.

[7 : 45] And in your striving to enter, part of that means to seek out exactly what the boundaries are, exactly what the narrow door is.

Well, the third point of this picture is one I think that ought to hold significant poignancy for us in Australia this week. The narrow door will not be open to each of us forever.

This week we've seen not one but two well-known prominent Australians die in accidents so unexpected.

The eternal destiny of these two men has now been decided for good or ill. You see, the Bible tells us that the door to God's kingdom will one day be shut and for us as individuals this will occur at one of two moments, either at the moment of our death or at the moment of Christ's return if we are still alive at that time.

At either of these two moments there is nothing in the Bible, friends, that would teach us that we get a second chance then. The time to make the decision is now.

[9 : 17] At the time of our death the door will be shut and if we are on the wrong side of it it will be forever. And what's more we don't know when this will happen for us.

It could happen any day as we've seen so painfully this week. And so the challenge is of course that we mustn't put off our response to someday when I'm ready.

instead if you want the saved to be you the time is now. The day is today. Well the fourth challenge that we face flows out from what we've seen so far and it's probably the most stark of all for us in our culture.

many will actually miss out on entry to the kingdom. And it's kind of the closest thing to an answer to the original question that we're going to get.

Will only a few be saved? Well Jesus says I can tell you that many will not. Some people some scholars want to believe that this type of warning is only hypothetical.

[10 : 30] that a loving God would never exclude anyone from the kingdom but will squeeze everyone in whether the door is narrow or not. Now we should be able to see why people would want to turn the text upside down in this way.

It's a tragic picture. They are knocking and they cannot get in. And we should never think upon the exclusion of some from the kingdom with academic curiosity or with some kind of satisfaction.

We should always think of it with tears. But to say that it won't happen that it's just hypothetical that the narrow soon to be closed door is actually a broad forever open door is just so mixed up isn't it?

And it robs the image of its true power. It robs the image of the gift that Jesus is offering his hearers then and now of the stark reality that could be real for us.

That there is a narrow way a way that will one day be shut and a way that will lead to the exclusion of those who have not entered on God's terms. But the gift in this is that the door is still open.

[11:54] It is not impossible to enter on God's terms. And in fact, those terms are not a mystery. They are not hidden. In fact, they are even shown in this passage itself.

God's way may require effort, but as is revealed in the answer given to those who knock after being left outside, it is quite simple.

It is either being known by God or not. Now, of course, God has knowledge of each of us, every thought, every action, our genetics, our history, what we ate for breakfast, but the knowledge he wants to have of us at that last day is a personal knowledge.

He wants to be able to look at us and know where we come from, meaning what is our family, how is our connection to him established.

Are we in his household? He wants to have a personal relationship. And if you look carefully at this passage, it's actually Jesus Christ himself who desires this knowledge.

[13:07] It's Jesus' earthly ministry that's described, we ate and drank with you and you taught in our streets, that's Jesus. And yet it's Jesus who will say, I do not know where you come from, go away from me.

Jesus Christ is in fact the owner of the house. He is the narrow door. In him are the boundaries of entry and we enter through knowing him and being known by him.

Well, what does it mean to know Jesus and be known by him? These ones who are left outside clearly knew Jesus. They were around him, they saw him teach, they ate with him at dinner parties, how much closer could you get?

Yet it's clearly possible, says Jesus, to have listened, to have been around him and yet not to have entered into a personal obedient relationship with him.

For us, it might be possible to live in a country with a Christian heritage, to go to a church school, to have been baptized as a baby, even confirmed as a teenager, to have gone to Sunday school, even to go to church each Sunday, even to take communion and yet not know and be known by Jesus in a saving way.

[14:34] You see, it's a relationship with Jesus that is crucial because only a relationship says, I believe you are alive, I believe you are the rightful Lord not only of the universe but of my life.

I submit to you and will learn from you and will ask of you and will allow you to shape me. All these things, the things of faith, are relational things.

Certainly knowing about Jesus is part of that, but knowing Jesus and being known by him is the core of what he desires of us. Well, the danger of preaching a sermon like this is that some who do indeed have a saving trust in Christ could be sitting in the pews with a tender conscience or in the midst of some depression or in trouble and saying to themselves, does Jesus actually know me? Have I really exerted enough effort to enter through the narrow gate? Is my faith strong enough? Am I really striving? Will I be shut out? Where do I stand? Well, friends, it is right for us to face the challenge of the text, to feel that tension, but I want to make certain that today what we're hearing is not that we are saved by some effort of our own, not that we can never be sure whether we've gone through the narrow door, but what we need to hear today is that we enter the kingdom only by God's grace to us in Christ through the door that he opens.

We enter that door by a personal response of repentance and faith to Christ. And this takes effort, yes, it's a conscious decision, an ongoing life, but it's not these things that save us.

[16:29] It's the owner of the house, Jesus Christ. If you're not sure whether you have entered through the narrow door, or whether you will, the answer is simple.

Don't be like those Jewish hearers and look to yourself, your own works, your own family associations, your own background, your own worthiness.

Look to Jesus Christ. Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Charles Spurgeon wrote these wonderful words. It is not thy hold of Christ that saves thee.

It is Christ. It is not thy joy in Christ that saves thee. It is Christ. It is not even faith in Christ, though that be the instrument. It is Christ's blood and merits.

Therefore, look not so much to thy hand with which thou art grasping Christ, as to Christ. Look not to thy hope, but to Jesus, the source of thy hope.

[17 : 39] Look not to thy faith, but to Jesus, the author and finisher of thy faith. We shall never find happiness by looking at our prayers, our doings, or our feelings.

things. It is what Jesus is, not what we are, that gives rest to the soul. So, friends, if you want to find yourself in the great reversal at the end of this passage, where the unexpected come in, where those from the north and the south and the east and the west come into this kingdom that might start off by looking like a little mustard seed, as we heard, but instead grows to a huge tree, a tree in which birds will find their rest and shelter.

If you want to find yourself in this unexpected kingdom, where those who expect to be in because of their own worth are left out, but those who look to Jesus, even though they be unexpected, are in, then, friends, yes, heed the warning of this passage, heed the warning that it is a narrow door, a door that will not be open forever, a door that some will miss out on, but also rejoice in the vastness of this kingdom.

Entry is in a narrow door, but it is not a narrow kingdom, friends, it is an abundant kingdom, a kingdom with as many spaces as those who will take up the offer of looking to Jesus, trusting in him, and rejoicing in what he has done for them on the cross.

Will you take up that warning and that rejoicing today? Amen.