

Doors and Gates

‘O enter then his gates with praise’. The Psalmist of course had in mind the gates of Jerusalem. This was a pilgrim song, to be sung by those who had come for one of the great festivals. Jerusalem was where God had made his home. Here in the Temple was the very presence of God, heaven on earth, as it were. And as the pilgrim approached, he had before a number of gateways, of doors. I want to explore the ideas of gates and doorways as we approach God.

Here is part of John’s vision of heaven in Revelation 21, with its description of the great gates,

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal. It has a great, high wall with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites; on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates

But not all gates are as impressive as that, and yet nonetheless can be gates to heaven. Jacob’s vision of the angels descending and ascending led him to describe the place where he was as ‘The very gate of heaven’

And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the LORD stood beside him and said, ‘I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.’ Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!’ And he was afraid, and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’

This might be a moment to take time out from following my train of thought to allowing ourselves space for our own. We have had two very different visions of the gates of heaven - one grand and awe-inspiring - the other seemingly quite banal - a ladder to the sky. Yet both stand in scripture as appropriate ways of gazing through a portal into the presence of God. Take a few minutes to think through your own vision of heaven, to look through the doors that have opened heaven to you. It may be the pictures that the Bible

has presented, like those of John or Jacob. It may be that the doors of heaven have opened to you through great scenes of natural beauty - Philip Sheldrake wrote a few years back of Celtic Christianity 'the natural landscape was both a concrete reality where people lived, and, at the same time, a doorway into another spiritual world. Maybe that has been a doorway for you - or it may have been music, or art. Remember that the essence of the orthodox concept of an icon is that in looking at that which has been prayed and painted, you go through that into the spiritual reality of God. What have been your doors, your gates of heaven?

Let's go back to our pilgrims coming to the gates of Jerusalem, and remember another of those great pilgrim psalms.

*O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob!
Behold our shield, O God look on the face of your anointed.*

*For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than live in the tents of wickedness.*

But although the gates were open for the pilgrims, there was a limit to their journey. As they went through the gates, they were not in the Holy of Holies, the presence of God. Between them and that sacred space were other doors, and in practice, none of them was going to be able to complete the ultimate goal, because only the High Priest could enter through that final door, through the curtain which was the final barrier - and that only once a year. In the meantime, other gates had selected who could travel further. So non-Jews for example, got no further than the court of the Gentiles.

Paradoxically, it has been a feature of religious history that people have in one way or another tried to keep people from God, whilst at the same time claiming to help them towards him. That stemmed in Jewish thinking from the belief that none of us are good enough to enter into God's presence. So John Henry Newman's Gerontius, when he finally enters the presence of God cries 'Take me away, and in the lowest deeps there let me be'. That sense of the need to separate the holy and the sinful can be seen in church architecture. In Orthodox churches, the altar is hidden behind the iconostasis. The priest comes out through the doors, but when the holy mysteries are to be celebrated, they shout 'the doors the doors' which are shut and only the communicant faithful may remain. We don't have it so dramatically in western churches, but nonetheless, the sanctuary is railed off, and in times past at least, who might enter the sanctuary was carefully guarded - you can read earnest discussions in the c.19th century of whether women could ever be allowed in that sacred space. And those innumerable jokes about who St Peter will let through the Golden gates are just an extension of that.

Despite any right and proper feelings of unworthiness, the gospel asks us to remember that the barriers, the walls have been broken down. Above all it is there in Matthew's description of the moment of Jesus death - when the sacrifice he had made removed the final barrier to the presence of God.

At that moment the curtain of temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.

It seems to me that we have to fight for that truth of God's open door policy, because from the times of the New Testament onwards, we have the record of people wanting to replace the veil with other gates and doors.

It comes down to all sorts of very practical things about churches and the way they behave. How many doors do we shut, and how many do we keep open. It is true of the doors of the church literally. It is one of the saddest things about our world at the moment that many churches doors are locked - because otherwise the insurance companies will not cover them. You have probably heard of the church door which had inscribed above it 'This is the very gate of heaven - locked during the winter months'.

The open door policy of Jesus was one of the most startling things about the new religion the first believers preached. Here for example is the story of Philip talking to a man who had had the doors closed in the face in a sense by Judaism, because of his physical condition, and who was surprised that acceptance was so readily available.

Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?' He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

So whether the church makes baptism, communion, or any other of our rites readily available is a sign of how we understand the open door which Jesus has given us. How much do we open, and how much do we close the gates? Here is a prayer which asks that we may be true to that picture. Think through whether the Church of which we are members - nationally, and in this parish lives up to the image of the open door.

*O God, make the door of this house wide enough
to receive all who need human love and fellowship;
narrow enough to shut out all envy, pride and strife.
Make its threshold smooth enough to be no stumbling block to children
nor to straying feet, but rugged and strong
to turn back the tempter's power.
God, make the door way of this house
the entrance to your eternal kingdom*

So let's return to the vision of heaven, whose doors have been opened. What do we see beyond those doors? To take a line from a hymn out of context 'We may not know, we cannot tell'. Here we have to take the visions of John, and the visions of poets and saints through the ages, and make of them what we

will. John Donne, with the mind of a poet, wrote a prayer which baffles the mind, with the sense in non-sense -

Bring us O Lord God at our last awakening into the house and gate of heaven to enter into that gate and dwell in that house, where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light; no noise nor silence, but one equal music; no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession; no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity; in the habitation of thy glory and dominion; world without end.

You might like to read the end of Pilgrim's Progress, as Christian enters heaven - and here is another wonderful vision of someone going through that gate. It is the American poet Vachel Lindsay's 'General William Booth enters into heaven'.

Booth led boldly with his big bass drum --
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)
The Saints smiled gravely and they said: "He's come."
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)
Walking lepers followed, rank on rank,
Lurching bravoos from the ditches dank,
Drabs from the alleyways and drug fiends pale --
Minds still passion-ridden, soul-powers frail: --
Vermin-eaten saints with mouldy breath,
Unwashed legions with the ways of Death --
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)

Every slum had sent its half-a-score
The round world over. (Booth had groaned for more.)
Every banner that the wide world flies
Bloomed with glory and transcendent dyes.
Big-voiced lasses made their banjos bang,
Tranced, fanatical they shrieked and sang: --
"Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?"
Hallelujah! It was queer to see
Bull-necked convicts with that land make free.
Loons with trumpets blowed a blare, blare, blare
On, on upward thro' the golden air!
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)

Booth died blind and still by Faith he trod,
Eyes still dazzled by the ways of God.
Booth led boldly, and he looked the chief
Eagle countenance in sharp relief,
Beard a-flying, air of high command
Unabated in that holy land.

Jesus came from out the court-house door,
Stretched his hands above the passing poor.
Booth saw not, but led his queer ones there
Round and round the mighty court-house square.
Then in an instant all that blear review
Marched on spotless, clad in raiment new.
The lame were straightened, withered limbs uncurled
And blind eyes opened on a new, sweet world.

Drabs and vixens in a flash made whole!
Gone was the weasel-head, the snout, the jowl!

Sages and sibyls now, and athletes clean,
Rulers of empires, and of forests green!

The hosts were sandalled, and their wings were fire!
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)
But their noise played havoc with the angel-choir.
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)
O shout Salvation! It was good to see
Kings and Princes by the Lamb set free.
The banjos rattled and the tambourines
Jing-jing-jingled in the hands of Queens.

And when Booth halted by the curb for prayer
He saw his Master thro' the flag-filled air.
Christ came gently with a robe and crown
For Booth the soldier, while the throng knelt down.
He saw King Jesus. They were face to face,
And he knelt a-weeping in that holy place.
Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?

There are so many other things that could be said. But this is our hope, the end-point of our pilgrimage,
the point at which we ask that the gates be lifted up, that we and all the saints may find our home with
God.