

3rd May 2020

Today's Reading: **John 10:1-10 I am the gate**

- from Revd. David Hildred



Apparently, when the Beatles wrote and sang “I am the egg man ... I am the walrus” it was during their phase of experimenting with mind-altering drugs, and the lyrics of that particular song weren't supposed to make complete sense even if there were links that could be seen to other people and events.

So, what do we make of Jesus saying, “I am the gate”? Has he been at the magic mushrooms too? Thankfully, we can be sure that he hasn't, and that we are supposed to make complete sense of what he says, because it does fit within the sweep of the message of Scripture - from Genesis to Revelation. Let's see how.

You might be aware of other “I am” titles that Jesus uses, such as “I am the Light of the world”, “I am the Bread of Life”, and just after our reading this morning he says, “I am the Good Shepherd”. Those two words “I am” are a significant link back into the OT when Moses encounters God in the bush that would not burn up and God declares his name to be “I am who I am” (Ex 3:14). That's a first fit for us in the sweep of Scripture.

“I am the gate”, though, is probably one of the “I am” sayings that we quickly move on from. We prefer “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life” or “I am the Resurrection”. And since in v11 he says “I am the Good Shepherd” we soon get swallowed up in lovely images of sheep and shepherds that seem to work better for us than gates. Gates are a bit wooden, aren’t they? Yet, what Jesus is saying in these verses is mind-blowing and world-changing.

He sets up the context for this gate-statement by referring to how sheep were kept overnight in a sheepfold. Historians tell us that the system in those days was for a number of flocks to be kept together in one sheepfold, with one watchman at work at the gate. So this is why in the morning the shepherd comes along and calls his sheep out, by name, and they follow the voice of the shepherd that they recognise and realise is a safe voice.

Now, our focus has drifted to the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep, and although Jesus picks up some of this later on, after our reading, his concern at this stage is to declare “I am the gate”. The way into and out of the sheepfold is to be going through Jesus.

He draws attention to how if people are trying to enter the sheep pen by any other way, such as climbing over the walls, then they are thieves and robbers with evil intent. The only safe passage in and out is via the gate, which is Jesus. Remember how this teaching comes just after Jesus has dealt with the Pharisees who were so upset that a blind man had been healed by Jesus that they threw that healed man out of the synagogue. Here were shepherds who were definitely not wanting to go in and out through the gate that is Jesus ... and so if they are listening, they will have heard themselves being called thieves and robbers. It’s in the book of Ezekiel (ch 34) that we hear about lazy and bad shepherds - another link to the sweep of Scripture

In v8 Jesus refers to “all who ever came before me” and that would be a reference to those who claimed to be the Messiah everyone had been waiting for, who would sort out the nation’s spiritual problems by their own skills and charisma. It’s very different from the prophets whom God had sent who pointed forward to the role that only Jesus could fulfil. The most recent of those had been John the Baptist who urged the people to see that Jesus was “the Lamb of God”, the one true sacrifice. Jesus calls those who came before him “thieves and robbers”, because they stole or diminished the blessings that God intended for his people, the blessings that are only fulfilled by going in through the gate that is Jesus.

The claim of Jesus is there in v10, that instead of loss and destruction that is offered by all these others, he is offering life, and life which is to the full - or in other translations - “abundant life”. Not just a little patch of sun-baked brown grass, but a whole field full of lush green pasture.

What an outrageous claim: don’t listen to religious leaders who offer you stuff without reference to me; don’t listen to other Messiah-types or other religions who claim to get you to God without going through me, the gate. Isn’t Jesus claiming too much here? Is he unhinged? Well, of course, anyone can claim to be the only gate to God, but the reason this reading is in the Easter season, is to remind us that the resurrection proves we can rely 100% upon what Jesus has said and done. In fact, we can’t dismiss anything of what Jesus said and did as irrelevant to us, since the resurrection shows he was deadly serious.

What is this abundant life he was offering? We get a glimpse of it in the Garden of Eden, in Genesis, until things go wrong and God says that one day someone will come to crush the head of the serpent - you know who the headcrusher is, don't you? We get another glimpse of this abundant life in the Book of Revelation when a new heaven and earth is created where God and Man dwell together in a new order of life where there is no more death, mourning, crying or pain - you know who brings God and Man together, don't you? The sweep of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation is about how Jesus secures all of this for us; he is the gate. There is no other way into this abundant life.

So what are we supposed to do with this gate-phrase? Firstly it is there for us to enjoy and activate in our lives so that we enjoy "life to the full". Can we do that during Lockdown? Can we do that even when there is no Lockdown but we face so many trials in life? You might like to come back to that in a few moments with some suggestions of answers.

And secondly, surely, the flow of the Bible is that we are blessed in order to be a blessing to others, and so this understanding of Jesus being the gate, the only gate, is not some secret that we are meant to keep to ourselves, but is something to be shared that others too might "come in and go out and find pasture". Does this period of Lockdown make people question, "There must be more to life than this"? And do we have an answer to share? Again, you might like to come back in a few moments with some thoughts about that.

Jesus outrageously said, "I am the gate". The resurrection proved it. "Life to the full" is the gift available to any of us who will go in and out through him. Praise the Lord!