

I am the Gate

“Very truly, I tell you; anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit... I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

John 10:1,9-10

There are not a great number of sheep folds in Shirley. You need to get into the car and head north up the M6, through the endless roadworks, and out into the wide open spaces, invigorating air, and endless skies of the Cumbrian Fells. The sheepfolds are dotted about the hillsides – dry stone walls fashioned in a circle with a gap for an entrance. In this country and in these days, the gap is filled with a movable metal fence. Two thousand or more years ago in the Middle East the gap in the sheepfold wall was filled with the recumbent form of the shepherd. Any predator would have to cross his body to reach the precious lives within. “I lay down my life for the sheep,” says Jesus later in the passage from John’s gospel.

We are familiar with thinking of gates as a sign of security - keeping safety within and danger without. It’s noticeable, and rather sad, that after a period of “open” front drives, more and more people locally are choosing to erect walls and gates around their properties. Just over the M42 it’s not uncommon for developments of new and expensive houses to be entirely walled and gated. A visible reminder of the many divisions in our society which contribute to people feeling un-safe.

So it’s tempting to think of this image Jesus used of being the gate as a picture of security. And so it is – “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus” says St Paul in his letter to the Christians in Rome.

But it’s not the whole picture. Jesus speaks about the sheep coming in – and also “going out and finding pasture.” Gates can keep in and confine as well as keeping safe. Jesus is the gate which can be open as well as closed.

In his book *The Open Gate*, Rev David Adam, who was once upon a time Vicar of Holy Island or Lindisfarne and a wonderful contemporary writer on insights from

Celtic Christianity, tells of a curse found in old Celtic folktales, whereby someone would be able to get into a field, but never to get out of it. “To be stuck in that place forever. It was seen as a definite curse to be unable to venture or to change.”

Maybe it calls to mind some of the early zoos, where wild cats were confined in small spaces and would wear a track round the perimeter as they paced round it hour after hour for days, weeks, months, years. Trapped.

Jesus is not just the closed gate of security. He is also the Open Gate of invitation. The invitation to explore, to find out more of who God is and what God is about.

Over the past 12 months most of us have spent an enormous amount of time in our homes, making our individual contributions to reducing the spread of the virus. Most of us are very fortunate that our homes are places of safety, and comfort. However, I suspect most of us have also had times when our own four walls have felt very restrictive, and we’ve longed to be able just to “get out” again.

Yet paradoxically, now that things are easing somewhat, maybe like me you find that you feel a little apprehensive about going out. It all feels very strange. And maybe quite scary.

On a very practical level, we’re all 12 months older than we were and all those months of reduced exercise have taken their toll on our muscles. We maybe feel a bit wobbly in a way that we didn’t before lock down. If you would like someone to accompany you the first few times that you go out, then please let the Parish Office or your regular phone contact person know – the pastoral team has a group of volunteers who will be delighted to come and literally walk alongside to help you to regain your confidence. Similarly, if you’d like to offer to help, please let the office know.

But it’s not just physical walls (or knees) which restrain us. Walls of habit and history can also hem us in – think of the “passer-by” in the stories we watched, heard or read about in last Sunday’s service. From time to time we need to re-examine the framework that has supported our faith for so long.

Is it still supporting? Or is it constraining? Is our faith strong enough to risk letting go a little so we can explore more of God and his loving purposes for us?

The final sentence in this morning's reading is one of my favourites in the whole Bible. "I came," says Jesus, "that they may have life and have it abundantly."

Have life.... and have it in abundance.

Not just so that we can live. But so that we can be alive.

Not just so that we can survive, or be secure, but so that we can flourish and grow and become who God always intended us to be (whatever our age or stage of life).

Not just so that we can grow up the metaphorical support in the garden, but so that we can branch out from it and ramble across the whole fence, bringing colour and fragrance to the whole area.

You get the idea.

And this goes way beyond "getting out" in a physical sense. It's about having open hearts and minds and spirits. We can pray, encourage, welcome and grow wherever we are. It's about our attitude rather than our location.

And just as we have people who are willing to be alongside those who are taking their first tentative physical steps outside, we have the Spirit of God within us who is always there to encourage and help as we begin to explore more of God.

And we have people within our church community who would love to walk and talk and pray with you as you do. Be brave, pick up the phone, and talk to Paul, and he will help to make it happen.

"I came," invites Jesus, "that they may have life and have it abundantly." May we step through the open gate into his abundant life today, tomorrow and always.