

*Sermon preached by Revd Rachel McDougall*

*St Paul's Canterbury*

*Easter 4A*

*Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2020*

*Jesus - the gate to abundant life.*

Life is full of inconsistencies and contrasts, even more so now.

This speech of Jesus is the same – full of metaphors piling up on top of each other:

shepherd and strangers,

sheep and sheepfold,

gatekeeper and gate,

bandits and thieves,

pastures and life.

Jesus is shepherd and the gate at one and the same time.

And yet, how different it is to hear this reading now in the midst of this inconsistent, paradoxical time!

There is hardship and pain, relief and joy at smashing the curve here. There is sorrow for those who've lost loved ones, those who've lost jobs and livelihoods.

There are the challenges of working remotely and at the same time supervising children's learning.

There is gratitude for all the goodness that is emerging from people helping each other with shopping and small signs of kindness.

There is the appreciation for the slower pace and time with families, at the same time as family violence is increasing.

There are the thieves and bandits of yellow snake oil salesmen taking advantage and narky attacks on hard working health officials and the mental anguish surfacing whilst others treasure the solitude.

Yet as Christians that is what we do – we hold the paradox of death and life, suffering and joy, despair and hope. We live in the in-between and as Christians live with both and find that God is present somehow in both.

As we hear Jesus' words differently this year it is a reminder that these words do not exist in a vacuum.

Readers would've heard the echoes of Ezekiel's reflection on the bad shepherds, the leaders of Israel who had not looked after their people and that God would send a good shepherd who would be known by them.

There is the story that happens before this speech – the story about the man born blind healed by Jesus on the Sabbath day that we heard in Lent.

A blind man whose eyes were washed and could see, labelled by neighbours and Jews and Pharisees as a sinner and slung out of the synagogue to find Jesus meeting him on the other side..

Here again is a paradox, a formerly blind man who sees and the religious leaders who are blinded by prejudice and unable to see Jesus.

In the midst of all of this Jesus talks about shepherds who know their sheep by name, and then says I am the gate.

I am the gate that opens up new life, new possibilities; a gate that will not shut in your face. I am the gate –the one who came to give life and give it in abundance.

Here is a gate that opens up that includes rather than excludes, that welcomes rather than isolates.

Jesus is the gate to abundant life. And what does that look like?

This is about who Jesus is and what Jesus offers us and what the rising of Jesus from the dead means, a new way open rather than a full stop.

It is the opening up of life.

For the blind man it was the ability to see, to be included.

John's own community would've also heard the welcome and inclusion in these words as people who themselves had been shut out of the synagogue.

Now here is Jesus saying I know you by name, you are safe within the walls of my sheepfold, you can come in and go out safely and find nurture and food.

You can come in and go out and find protection, provision and presence.

In these days when our doors are shut, when we are told to stay at home, in the midst of fear and uncertainty Jesus also says to us I am the gate to abundant life. This is who I am, you are safe with me; I know you; you are mine.

Listen to me.

Trust in me.

Jesus is the gate of protection, of provision and presence.

We are protected in that God is with us.

There is provision – in that we will have enough, and that God is enough and can be trusted.

There is presence as we are loved by the shepherd and guardian of our souls, as the psalmist says you are with me.

We are living in a time of physical distance, feeling exposed to a tiny but dangerous virus, isolated with our lives turned upside down.

Yet at the same time God says to us that God Eastered in us, that the raising of Jesus from the dead opens the gate of freedom and opportunity to us.

There is nowhere that the love of God cannot reach, there can be life anew even in these days.

Catherine of Siena lived at the time of another pandemic, the middle ages, the time of the great plague, in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century.

At a young age she decided to follow God despite opposition from her parents. She stayed in her room for three years – a time of solitude and struggle.

Within the difficulties of that time as she faced herself and struggled, she came to an intimate deep relationship with God.

Besieged by doubts and inner taunts she banished them with laughter and then Jesus appeared to her.

‘Where were you when all this was happening?’ she asked Christ reproachfully.

‘I was in your heart’ was the reply.

As she said: 'all the way to heaven is heaven because heaven is the way'.

This is one of her prayers:

*Because of sin  
you would not enter into your glory  
in the way your truth had intended.  
Your garden was locked up,  
and so we could not receive your fruits.  
This is why you made the Word,  
your only-begotten Son,  
a gatekeeper.*

...

*O gentle gatekeeper!  
O humble Lamb!  
You are the gardener,  
And once you have opened the gate of the heavenly garden,  
paradise,  
you offer us the flowers  
and the fruits  
of the eternal Godhead.*

*-Catherine of Siena 1347-1380  
The Prayers of Catherine of Siena  
Suzanne Noffke, OP translator and editor*

*Lections:  
1 Peter 2.19-25  
Psalm 23  
John 10.1-10*