

*St Brandon's, Sermon for 29th April 2023.*

*Acts 2:42-end; John 10:1-10*

### ***The church door***

*Alison Hobbs*

Last night some of us were at St Mary's Church in Coxhoe for the Deanery confirmation service. We were there in support of Peter Bailey who has been part of this congregation for a bit over a year, having explored and grown his faith in the small scale midday Eucharist services in the castle chapel: the work of the Community of the Well. He's unable to be here today due to pressing family matters so I'm not embarrassing him by this mention, and in saying it was a wonderful and special occasion. There were two candidates for baptism and twenty for confirmation; Bishop Sarah presided and, having anointed and called down the Holy Spirit on each, we came to the commissioning.

The opening words of the commission were taken from the Acts passage we heard today: *"Those who are baptized and are called to worship and serve God, Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers?"*

Suddenly, we were back in the story of Acts, with the fledgling church in its earliest days, immediately following Pentacost. Already, in addition to praying, the apostles are teaching in the synagogues, building each other up in fellowship, and in the breaking of bread together: the pattern we still recognise as the church at worship today.

The commission continued,

*Will you persevere in resisting evil?*

*Will you proclaim by word and example, the good news of God in Christ?*

*Will you seek and serve Christ in all people, loving your neighbour as yourself?*

*Will you acknowledge Christ's authority over human society, by prayer for the world and its leaders, by defending the weak, and by seeking peace and justice?*

After each petition, we all responded *"With the help of God, I will."*

These are defining activities that we do as church, and we see that early, fledgling church doing all those things, too. They won the hearts of many for Jesus through their awesome doings, their generous sharing and caring; there was great goodwill towards them *and day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*

What an inspirational reading as the preamble to our Annual Parochial church meeting. Immediately after this service we will hear a resume of the activities of St Brandon's at worship, and in our outreach. The reports from teams and the overview of the whole for the purpose of accountability, yes, but also celebration and recognition of the commitment to each other in the ways we endeavour to follow that commission, with the help of God. The exciting work of the pmc core team, leading towards new understanding of God's promised and preferred future for us. The addition to our numbers – so much more interesting than the numbers on the balance sheet – but those too: the stewarding and health of our finances, and an opportunity to challenge ourselves about our priorities. All in the context of thanksgiving for God's great goodness – oh, and a glass of wine!

But that's after this service, I'd like to return briefly to last night's confirmation, which included the gospel passage immediately following the passage we have heard this morning. Having named himself 'The Gate', Jesus names himself, 'The Good Shepherd'. At the end of the service, Bishop Sarah, holding her crook, led the newly baptised and confirmed down the aisle and out of the church. She was the shepherd leading the little flock out into the world, each carrying the light of Christ - a candle lit from the paschal candle.

To be led out was not just a good ending, it was emphasising the essential movement that is the way of Christ: Jesus would withdraw to a quiet place to pray, to meet with his Father. Having drawn on his Father's love, he returned to active ministry, teaching and healing. He returned to the task sustained, guided, and united with his Father's will; working in God's strength not his own.

This is the essential pattern for us.

Collectively, we come together in here each week to meet with, and worship God. To receive God's Word, to share teaching and break the bread, and pray together. We then enjoy a cup of coffee and chat, sharing concerns and hopes – the encouragement we get from fellowship: being with others of a Christian perspective and hope that helps us know we are not alone but part of a committed and inter-dependant body. Restored, refreshed, re-fuelled and remembered, we go back out to get on with our week, taking all that with us – we don't leave it behind and 'move on', we go out with the light of Christ in order to shine in our homes and work places, as best we can.

It's a rhythm of coming in and going out, being drawn in and led out, being God's flock, listening to his voice.

When Jesus illustrated this to the Pharisees they didn't initially understand. Not surprising, as he didn't identify who he meant by thieves and bandits, the shepherd, and the gatekeeper.

He was referring to the imagery Ezekial uses in the Old Testament, the expectation of God becoming Israel's true shepherd in the future, a new model in contrast to their sins and failings.

*Ezekial 34 starts 'The word of the Lord came to me: mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy and say to them – to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ... You have not strengthened the weak, healed, sought the lost but ruled with force and harshness.'*

That is the context Jesus is using, and having stirred their memories, he identifies himself as the gate in this picture.

The only way in.

By implication, they are being asked to consider whether they are acting in the style of good shepherds, using the gate, or are acting like the bandits and thieves, those shepherds of Israel accused of using force and stealing the sheep to feed themselves.

*Ezekial follows in Chapter 34 with 'For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out ... gather and bring them into their own land ... to rich pasture ... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep.'*

At this point in his 'figure of speech', Jesus is pointing to himself as the Gate, the way, the opening, through which God will interact with his people, and his people with God.

In so many places in John's gospel, Jesus says variations of, 'See me and you see the Father.' 'Know me, and you know the Father.'

Just as a gate, a door, has two sides, Jesus Christ acts as the interface between earth and heaven, one side facing us on earth, and one side facing his Father in heaven. He is the way through which we are able to glimpse, receive, and the door through which we will ultimately pass when we die.

Glimpse and receive in worship, take it out into the world. In, out. In, out.

The other function of a gate or door is to keep safe. This building is a place of safety, traditionally and legally, a place of sanctuary. Safe in so far as we are

able to be God-centred in all that takes place in here, challenged but only in the knowledge of God's strength holding and leading us.

We have a simple and very beautiful oak door. Usually closed against the elements, but un-locked to admit anyone seeking peace and sanctuary. Many come in, many pray here. But it is a solid oak door, and there is no way of knowing what might be inside. It can be intimidating for people who are unfamiliar with church to push it open, and risk the unknown.

We, the body of Christ are a door, too.

How we relate to those who do push open the door to the building is what will make all the difference to whether or not they sense God's invitation to come, belong, be. How we relate to others beyond the door of this building makes all the difference to whether or not they are attracted, feel invited. We are commissioned to make God's difference in the world and be doors through which people might step, might pursue baptism, might desire confirmation, might become devoted disciples.

Am I an open door; a door opener? Are you? Are we?

Lord, help us to be good gatekeepers, in your name. Amen