

## PALM SUNDAY

2 APRIL 2023

Isaiah 50. 4-9a

Psalm 118. 1-2, 19-29

Philippians 2. 5-11

Matthew 21. 1-11

As Jesus makes his way into Jerusalem he is making the kind of pilgrimage that Jews had been making to the holy city for centuries. The book of psalms has quite a lot of what are known as psalms of ascent: psalms sung by pilgrims as they made their way up to mount Zion. Jerusalem is set high on hill and as pilgrims made their way there in family and village groups they sang.

This morning we have said the words of one as we began:

Open to me the gates of righteousness,  
that I may enter through them  
and give thanks to the Lord.

This is the gate of the Lord;  
the righteous shall enter through it.

Psalm 24 goes:

Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.

We know that Jesus went many times to Jerusalem. Luke tells us that he is first taken there on the eighth day to do what was customary under the law – is the phrase he uses.

As I prepared this week I heard an echo about gates as we have just finished reading four weeks from John's gospel. In John, as I pointed out last week, there are seven *I Am* sayings of Jesus.

One of those *I Am* sayings is: *I am the gate. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.* It is saying which sits together in John with the saying: *I am the good shepherd.*

*I am the good shepherd.* The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.

‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 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.

We have laid great store by the image of Good Shepherd. I suppose it appealed to a society which was primarily rural; people involved in agriculture for their livelihoods. Many of us had – maybe even still have - relatives on farms or knew people who were. The pastoral Jesus appealed to us. But not much anymore. It makes little sense in an urbanised society.

When ministry colleagues get together, we often find ourselves talking about the gatekeepers in our communities; who they are, how it is they keep the gates; issues they prevent communities from talking about; changes they resist happening; the people they keep out or others who they privilege. This gatekeeping is a practice that's deeply human. It doesn't really matter what kind of organisation it is we're involved in. There is always someone who does it; patrolling the boundaries, setting the parameters of inclusion and exclusion; although it's always handy to keep the parameters of inclusion a little hazy so that control can be retained.

The one that the gatekeepers have rejected has become the chief cornerstone; it is marvellous in our eyes.

Access to the temple in Jesus' time was highly controlled by the religious elite. So many were prevented from coming in: the blind, the lame, lepers, tax collectors, and the general category of sinners, meant that pretty much anyone could have the label applied and be rejected by the gatekeepers. The gate of the city led to the gate of the temple. Jesus the gate enters through the gate of the holy city, into a sheepfold that at first seems ecstatic at his arrival but which quickly turns hostile; deadly. There are wolves inside the sheepfold and later in the week they will slaughter the shepherd and scatter the sheep.

Jesus himself, though, becomes the gate, the one through whom all may enter; may come in and go out and find pasture.

There was an item on the news last night about a museum to the memory of people held in orphanages in Victoria, which was opened in Geelong yesterday. The museum holds records and tells the stories of the 225 institutions across the state of Victoria from the 1850s to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century - orphanages, children's Homes, foster care, training farms, missions, and laundries where, vulnerable children lived and worked without love and nurturing and were often subject to cruel physical and sexual abuse and neglect. Geelong alone had thirteen orphanages.

I know a woman, my age, who, as an unmarried woman, a daughter of a large catholic family, had a child as a late teenager. The child was given up, taken away, I'm not sure. She later married, raising six more children. These children, apart from one, know nothing of their older sibling. What became of this child after they and the shame of their birth was taken away? What became of their life? Were they nurtured well and loved; or neglected and abused, bearing a yoke of shame and dysfunction all their life. They were taken away and cast out into a kind of existential isolation. Abandoned.

The gatekeepers of the time said that an unmarried girl with child was a thing of shame. Mother and child were separated; both living with the pain of that wrench all their days. While the churches sought to help in these circumstances, at this remove, it's hard to know whether it was in order to provide care for some of society's most vulnerable, where families were incapable of caring, or whether churches sought to be part of the papering over of the shame; this is not clear. Maybe both are true. What we know is that these places of so-called care became places of profound suffering and the effects of that suffering are life-long.

Like the inter-generational trauma legacy of the stolen generations continues to be felt by descendants of those stolen, so the legacy of the mistreatment of orphans continues to be passed from generation to generation.

The one who calls himself the gate of the sheep has been gathering the lame and the blind, lepers and outcasts, along the way to Jerusalem.

*Hosanna to the Son of David!*

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*

*Hosanna in the highest heaven!*' they cry as he passes through the gate.

Yet the kingdom *they* hope for will not be established. They long for a political solution but as the castigating cartoon and poem by Michael Leunig in yesterday's Age reminds us, politics is a grubby, sordid business.

Jesus received the praise of the crowds, but he knows what is ahead and that the praise is ultimately empty. He makes his way into Jerusalem to open the way to another kind of reign. One of hearts and souls and lives.

As the church contracts and we feel like we are caught up in some irreversible decline we can take comfort in the fact that we are not alone. The church as an institution is declining; as are most institutions in our society. Barely any institutions are trusted these days and seem to be able to do the job they were started to do. We have lived through a time where our world has been overseen by institutions, but we all seem to be pretty ambivalent about them now. And when we see the legacy of 150 years of orphanages, we can rightly wonder how can people have got it so wrong; how were these things allowed to happen.

The solitary man rides into the city, through the gates. He knows the week will end for him as a solitary man, alone, on the cross; abandoned. Take up *your* cross and follow he says.

The gospel places a personal imperative on us. We hope for political solutions for the world's problems, for our society's ills. We hope that institutions will do good work and find that in time they become entangled in their own immensity and self-preservation and struggle to fulfill their mission. And people join then with good intentions and then find themselves disillusioned or mistreated. We hope to be able to make the world right, but struggle to achieve it.

Yet there is something about the solitary journey to the cross, of Jesus, and of each of us, as we walk the path. As Jesus was the site of the life of God and brought healing and wholeness, and the life of heaven close to people, so we may do this in our own lives. This is the miracle and the mystery of the life of God that we are called to bear. Not so much to do good deeds but to *be* good deeds. To be bearers of the good news in who *we are*: in our living, in our humanity in the pattern of Jesus bearing the mercy and lovingkindness of God. This is the kind of living which enables people to cry hosanna.

We move into Holy Week and we watch and relive the events which lead to Jesus' death and the breaking out again of the life of God – the light shining in the darkness. May our remembrance shed light for us, that we know and enjoy the life of God in our living.

Andrew Boyle