

The Door and The Way

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taken from a series of lectures given by Rev. Weatherhead

[Jesus said,] *I am the door.* - John 10:9
I am the way. - John 14:6

"I AM the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and go out, and find pasture." (K.J.V.)

If, in imagination we go straight to Palestine and meditate for a few moments on the closing scenes in the daily life of a shepherd in our Lord's day, our text will light up at once with meaning and beauty.

We must remember that in the East, now, as in the days of long ago, the shepherd goes in front of his sheep, leading them, not driving them from behind as is the case in the West.

Let us imagine that it is evening. As the sun is setting and the shadows lengthen, we can see the shepherd coming over the should of the hill, making for the sheepfold down in the valley.

The sheepfold must be described. It consists of four high, rough walls surmounted by thorns fixed along the top so as to keep out the thief and the robber who might climb up some other way (John 10:1). In one of the walls, the one nearest the stream that threads its way through the valley, there is a space a little wider than a man's body. The shepherd, preceding the sheep, stands in that gap facing outwards, and he calls his sheep to him by name as they come toward him over the hillside. One of the most impressive and lovely things which you can still see in Palestine is the way in which, if two flocks of sheep intermingle while the shepherds are chatting or eating, a shepherd with the utmost ease can separate them without any use of dogs or of chasing the sheep about. He stands a little above them on the hillside, and simply calls them to him by name (John 10:3).

Let us imagine the first sheep approaching the shepherd. It is the leader, a strong healthy animal. The shepherd, however, looks it over carefully for some brier may be clinging to its fleece and cause it subsequent discomfort. Then, satisfied that all is well, the shepherd turns his body sideways so that the sheep may move past him into the fold. The shepherd literally is the door, and when the sheep has passed by him it is safe (John 10:9).

The next sheep has bruised its head on a rock, perhaps, or it has been butted by another. Then the shepherd takes his horn of oil and gently massages it into the bruised head. We remember the sentence in the shepherd psalm: "Thou has anointed my head with oil." (Psalm 23:5)

The sheepfold is placed in that position so that the nearby stream, running through the valley, can be trapped into a large stone two-handled cup. The water runs into the cup and out again - "My cup runneth over." Stephen Haboush, who was a shepherd for many years on these very hills, has explained that a sheep is frightened of turbulent water. A rushing stream can carry a frightened sheep down stream and drown it, its thick fleece, if sodden, making it hard for the sheep to spring out of the water, hence the sentence, "He leadeth be beside the *still* waters."

Here is a sheep approaching now that looks very jaded and out of sorts. The shepherd lifts the big stone cup brimming full with water. By lifting it the water is quiet and the sheep drinks more readily. When the sheep is refreshed the shepherd turns his body again and the sheep passes into the fold.

Now all the sheep are folded. The shepherd does not rely on any temporary hurdle or gate to close the entrance. He builds in the gap a huge fire, with himself on the inside, near the sheep. Then crouching over the fire, he eats his evening meal, watching over his flocks by night. Finally, having made up the fire he wraps himself in his cloak, and with his feet to the fire he lies down near the sheep. Their bleating slowly ceases and, as the stars shine out, the shepherd may rest, as the sheep do, in perfect safety. Wild animals may be in evidence. Indeed the cry of the hyena and the jackal and even the wolf may still be heard. But wild animals are terrified of fire. They cannot jump the high walls, crested with thorns, and in the gateway between the wolf and the sheep is not only the fire, but *the body of the shepherd*.

Tomorrow at dawn the shepherd will lead them out again, and in that rhythm they spend their days going in and going out. But in every experience the shepherd is with them.

I think the lovely picture has much to teach us. We who try to follow Christ, the Door and the Way, must learn that rhythm. There is the going in and going out; in to the quiet hours of meditation and rest and refreshment, and then out, adventuring perhaps far and wide, and yet safe in both going in and going out as long as we do not stray from the Shepherd; into the fold with God's other sheep and then out to witness in the world. We have a sense of security because we are in Christ's care, but a sense of freedom because the whole world is our pasture. Much could be said about the rhythm of the Christian life in which we can err if we are "in" too much or "out" too much.

But I wish to focus our thought more on the ideas conveyed to us by the words "door and way." To do this let us look back at the world into which Jesus came with these liberating words. Indeed, what a Liberator he was! He came, he said, quoting Isaiah, "to proclaim release to the captives, ... to set a liberty them that are bruised." And he added, "Today hath this scripture been fulfilled in your ears." (Luke 4:18-21).

The world to which he came was a world in chains. Men groaned under their burdens. We complain of our taxation, but Jesus' father paid a water tax, a city tax, a meat tax, a salt tax, a house tax, and a road tax. Roman tyrants could exact tribute to Caesar, compel a man to carry a burden, lend his cloak, and accompany any Roman traveler on a journey, however dangerous and uncongenial.

The ecclesiastical tyranny imposed by the Pharisees - their own countrymen - was just as irksome. Meticulous ceremonial observances had to be carried out. Some of the details make one laugh now, but it was no laughing matter then. It must have been infuriating and exasperating. That it should ever be linked with the word "religion," that ever man should impose it on his fellows and pretend that the loving Father, the Holy God, cared about such trivial nonsense, accounts in part for the blazing and scathing words that Jesus used about the Pharisees. The measure of the fierceness of his invective was the measure of the tyranny they imposed and of their refusal to understand.

For instance, one must not wear false teeth on the Sabbath, for to do that is to carry a burden; a woman might wear a ribbon on her gown if it were sewn in - if only pinned in, that, if you please, was carrying a burden. A man must not journey more than a certain distance on the Sabbath, but if, the night before, he went to the prescribed limit and concealed a morsel of food at that point he could call that point his lodging and so travel a new "Sabbath day's journey" beyond it. A woman must not use a mirror on the Sabbath, for if she espied a white hair, she might pluck it out and so fall into the sin of "reaping" on the Sabbath.

With this background, can we not feel and see what a new way Christ opened up; what a door he unfastened? The outward life of the people was hedged round with tiresome Roman restrictions; their inner life hedged round with stupid Jewish ceremonial laws. Christ opened a door into freedom and joy and liberty. Religion was a way of life, and a way of life with God as Father and Friend; putting Caesar in a new perspective of relative unimportance and making religion a relationship with a God, all-Wise, all-Loving, purposeful and powerful, one who alone *mattered*.

Again and again I find myself coming back to the beginning of Christianity. Let us do so again now. Let us remember that Christianity began with a handful of simple people trying to learn how to live, and believing, when they met him, that Jesus was a Door and a Way to life.

I believe he chose men like Peter and James and John and Andrew because their minds were open to new ideas. Their thoughts were able to take new shape. The ecclesiastics were far too rigid, too stereotyped, too set in their ceremonies and conventions and restrictions to be able to respond to the revolutionary ideas of Christ. The first followers of Jesus were not outstandingly clever people and certainly were not wealthy or of high social standing, but they could love and they could change their ideas. When they looked at Jesus, I think they felt: "This is what God meant human life to be like. This is true religion. Here is the secret of the mystery of the art of life."

Are not men seeking this Way today? Is not the unrest of our time due mainly to the fact that the art of victorious living eludes us? Thinking people do not expect life to be a long experience of facile happiness, but they do want a basis of certainty from which they can project a faith that there *is* a solution. They are not blind to the difficulties of the Church, but they have the right to expect that the Church will respond to their need, that its services will be relevant to the problems they meet, that they will not be put off by meaningless formulae, or asked to give intellectual assent to unexamined and unexplained propositions which, as far as they understand them at all, seem either incredible or unimportant. No one likes to have his mind doped by pious phrases that could have any of a dozen meanings.

So nearly two thousand years ago, men and women banded themselves together to try out this new way of life. They were repeatedly called indeed "the men of the way" (Acts 9:2, 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). They suffered and were persecuted, but they had an underlying joy and a philosophy of life that made them ignore their own troubles - which God, they felt, would handle for them - and be much more concerned about other people.

They didn't worry much about what they believed. The young church had no set creeds for three hundred years, and even then only wrote them down to rebut the attacks made on them. Their creed grew up out of their experience and we should be wise to love God and our neighbor and keep very close to Christ and let our creed take shape, not trying to force it into accepted channels, but concentration on loving and praying and meditating, so that belief will follow experience just as it does when a man falls in love with a woman. He doesn't begin with a creed about her. He thinks, "I would like to share her life if she will have me," and his beliefs about her grow up out of his experience. Is Christianity in its early stages very different from falling in love with Christ, sharing life with him, trying out his way of living? When I asked the Chaplain General of all Her Majesty's Forces what was the gist of his message to the men, he replied very simply: "I want them to fall in love with Jesus Christ."

Clearly it is incumbent on us to commend this Way to others. Many seem unable to find any door into a fuller and more satisfying way of living.

The kind of burglar of the soul who ask you whether you are saved, just as you want to get a nap in the corner of a railway coach, is fortunately becoming extinct. It should be remembered that a religious witness, and indeed an invitation to another to follow our Christian way of life, should frequently begin a long way from the use of religious jargon. The invitation, "Come to Jesus," doesn't make sense to a large number of people. Appeals to "surrender the life to Christ" can be nauseating, superior, and repellent. But everyone understands good humor, good will, and the kindly deed. Sometimes the most religious thing we can do in a situation is to keep the conversation off religion. Jesus didn't say to Zaccheaus: "Brother, are you saved?" He said: "May I come and have dinner with you?" The prodigal's return was not celebrated by a service but by roast veal, and the story ends not with a prayer meeting, but with a dance.

When Dick Sheppard was visiting some troops, the chaplain pointed out one soldier and said to Dick: "I can't get near him at all. Religion doesn't interest him and I can make no impression on him." Dick and

the soldier were seen together later in animated conversation. The chaplain was astonished and asked Dick the secret. "I should be glad, Dr. Sheppard," he said pompously, "if you would explain what religious approach you make to a person who seems entirely indifferent to religion." "Religion," said Dick, with his lovable twinkle, "I didn't talk religion. I told him two funny stories and then asked after his mother!" - But isn't that the right approach to religion? Good humor, good will, caring - these make a bridge and only after such a bridge is built can the traffic of more intimate religion pass. The pope was called the pontiff, or the bridgemaker. In some sense we must all be pontiffs. Blessed are the bridgemakers. A bridgehead so often establishes the kingdom of heaven against its enemies.

We simply must not try to impose our views on other people. We do the same jobs as other people do and meet the same difficulties and face the same suffering - for religion is no insurance against trouble - and do all and meet all with those qualities that spring from a close communion with the Mater, thinking more of others' troubles than of our own. That's the WAY to win people. Christians should "have a WAY with them," seeking, in the lovely language of St. Francis' prayer: "No so much to be loved as to love, no so much to be consoled as to console, no so much to be understood as to understand."

Hundreds of people wistfully seek a way. The tragedy is they don't believe the Church knows the way either, so they go on in their frustration, their loneliness, their unhappiness, never feeling quite well, never knowing radiance of spirit, hating to be alone, filling every possible moment with some triviality or other, lest the cloud of their condition should cover the whole sky of consciousness and leave them in panic and despair. Their condition is a challenge to every one of us to deepen his communion with Christ, so that we may influence the world as the early Church did. We must be men of the Way, until, while men are too reticent to say so, they may know in their hearts that we have a secret, the clue to life's meaning and purpose and joy, and turn and find their way to his feet.

Last, this one point. There is never any situation, believe me, from which Jesus Christ cannot find the way out. The Way! The Door! If you go in, he will show you the way out. "I am the Door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and go out, and find pasture." Perhaps you don't know which way to turn. In some difficult situation you don't know what to do. He comes to you and says: "I am the Way. I will find the way out for you." You have only to be quiet for half an hour and look at him and listen. You will know which way to turn.

I was reading recently about a famous picture in which the artist sought to depict that great interview between Faust and Satan. Faust gambled for his soul, and the artist depicts the two sitting at a chessboard, the Devil on one side and Faust on the other. In this picture the face of the Devil leers with glee because he thinks he has got Faust completely at his mercy and completely beaten. I don't understand the game of chess, but I am told that if you look at the picture it does look as if the situation is checkmate. Faust looks crumpled up and beaten. The Devil gloats in superiority. One day a master of chess was studying the picture in the gallery where it hangs. He looked at it and looked at it and then, to the surprise of everybody else in the art gallery, he shouted out: "It's a lie! The king and the knight can move!"

Yes, Jesus is the King. You are his knight. There is another move. He knows that move. It is a lie to say: "There isn't a way out. I am beaten." There is another move. Have you ever been in a situation and known the comfort of just that, that there is a way out? Imagine that you and I are lost in a jungle at night. We don't know which way to turn. We stumble about in the darkness. We trip over the roots, blunder through the undergrowth, get our faces lashed by the low boughs of the trees. All through the night it goes on until we are in agony, frantic with fear. Then, as the dawn comes you shout to me and say: "I can see a road." The inexpressible comfort of knowing that there is a way! A traveler friend of mine, who on one occasion was actually and literally lost, said to me: "When I saw the road I could have knelt down and kissed it." Exactly! The situation in one way is not very different. When you find Christ you may still be in the jungle, but what a difference in your heart! You are not at the end of the journey, but you are at the end of your wandering, at the end of looking for a way. There is a way home. Jesus says that to you *now*. "Come with me! Try my way of life! I am the way!"

A poor man hung on a cross and thought that there was no way, that this was the end, deluded fanatic as he was. And he turned to Jesus, and Jesus said: "Today thou shalt be with me in Paradise." Is it fanciful to end the chapter more or less where we began it, by saying that the body of the Good Shepherd, turned, and behold, a door, a door into Paradise? My brother, you can find it too. "I am the door; by me if any man enter in he shall be saved." Yes, saved, for no one is lost who knows the way home.

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen. Jude 1:24-25

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