

Easter 2 C – Open the door

Gospel reading: John 20:19-31. Epistle reading: Acts 5:27-32

H&S 74 (When the Church of Jesus shuts its outer door)

When the Church of Jesus Shuts its outer door Lest the roar of traffic Drown the voice of prayer: May our prayers, Lord, make us Ten times more aware That the world we banish Is our Christian care.	If our hearts are lifted Where devotion soars High above this hungry Suffering world of ours: Lest our hymns should drug us To forget its needs, Forge our Christian worship Into Christian deeds.	Lest the gifts we offer, Money, talents, time, Serve to salve our conscience To our secret shame: Lord, reprove, inspire us By the way you give; Teach us, dying Saviour, How true Christians live.
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Address:

Although that song that we've just sung is not in either of our two song books, it is in *Hymns and Songs*, a book which we don't have here. It's the first hymn ever written by Fred Pratt Green - who later wrote 27 hymns that **are** in *Hymns and Psalms*, and who was I'd say the most productive Methodist hymnwriter of the 20th century. Our first and last hymns this morning were also written by him. **And** he was a lovely man – Ann and I got to know him because he was our minister and baptised our youngest child during the late 1960s, when we were living in Sutton, on the outskirts of London. And it was during those years that he **wrote** "When the Church of Jesus shuts its outer door", for use during a stewardship campaign at the church where we then worshipped.

That song's call to the Church not to stay behind a "**shut** outer door" but to open it to "this hungry, suffering world of ours" resonates with the stories in both the readings we've just heard. And what a contrast there is between those two stories – the first when "the **doors** of the house where the disciples had met were **locked** for fear of the Jews" (*John 20:19*), and the second about an occasion not that long afterwards when those same disciples had been "in the temple ... teaching the people" (*Acts 5:25*) about the risen Jesus; and Peter, Peter who'd been so scared as to deny knowing Jesus on the night before the crucifixion, was now fearless in speaking up for the disciples when they were brought before the Jewish leaders of whom they had been so afraid before.

That was a huge turnaround for those disciples; and, like Fred Pratt Green's hymn, that turnaround challenges us, the disciples of the 21st century, not to try to isolate **ourselves** from today's world as if behind closed doors, but to **open wide** the doors of the Church – open them **both** so we can go out **and** so those outside can come in. Let's focus on those two ideas in turn.

Firstly, the doors of the Church need to be open so **we** can go out – go out to **hear** and **respond to** what's going on in the world outside. Some of what's happening is bad and we need to oppose it. But there are also **good ideas** out there which the Christian Church as a whole has been slow to take on board. Among the **bad** ideas outside, perhaps the worst is that **it's out of date** to live by **faith** – faith that the ultimate reality is a God who is love and that we should seek to reflect that love in our own lives as Jesus did.

However, much we may differ on other theological issues, we can surely all agree that our aim in life should be to follow the teaching and example of unconditional love that Jesus gave us. We need to witness to **that faith** in the community **outside the Church** – and I think we get a pointer to what that means in the words of one Church historian who said that in the early Christian Church there were no great preachers after the apostles, and that the communication of Christ was done by the common people of the Church, who did it by the quality of their living. We too are called to share our faith by the quality of our living.

But following the example of Jesus doesn't only mean showing love in how we respond to our immediate neighbours and their needs. It certainly does mean that, but it also means challenging people and things that cause needless suffering or restrict the flourishing of our neighbours in the wider community around us and in the world as a whole. Jesus gave us an example of challenging society in this way – and a reminder that there is a place for demo's! - when, to quote from Mark's gospel, he “entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves” (*Mark 11:15*). And he described the temple authorities who were profiting from all this financial activity as “robbers” (*Mark 11:17*).

In doing that, Jesus was challenging the idea that it's OK to put **profits** before **people**. The temple authorities were making excessive **profits** at the expense of the mostly poor **people** who came to the temple to sacrifice animals or birds. The people had to buy these animals and birds **at** the temple, using a special currency into which they had to change their money, and the temple authorities were massively overcharging them for these services.

And putting profits before people – acting as if **money** matters more than people – still goes on on a massive scale. Just this last fortnight we've seen the “Extinction Rebellion” demos on climate change and the impact that the Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg has been having; and the United Nations Panel on Climate Change warns us that oil and gas production has to fall by more than half if climate change is not to become disastrous; but to quote from Friday's *Guardian (Journal, 26/4/2019, p.3)*, “the economic self-interest and power of the fossil fuel industry is deliberately sabotaging this goal” – just one example of **profits, wealth**, being treated as more important than **people**, in this case the billions who will suffer if climate change continues.

And Jesus said that “You cannot **serve** God **and** wealth” (*Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13*) and also that we serve God when we serve **people** (*Matthew 25:31-41*) - so as followers of Jesus **we** like him need to declare publicly, perhaps by demo's and lobbying, that the idea that people matter less than wealth is wrong. The gap between rich and poor has been growing, at least in part **because** the powers that be have been acting as if wealth mattered more than people, and we need to challenge the growth in that gap too. And this worship of wealth is just one example of the things we need to go outside our church doors to challenge – an example that I picked because of **Jesus** highlighting its importance by demonstrating against it in the main shrine of Judaism.

But as I said earlier, there's good as well as bad among the thoughts that those beyond our church doors are having, and we also need to get outside those doors to hear and learn from those good thoughts. You may not all agree with me – and that's fine - but **I** think the Church has needed to learn from science not to see the Bible stories of creation as accurate pieces of history, but as myths or parables which embody insights that are true all the time. The Church has **also** had to learn from people in wider society, such as the suffragettes, that women and men are equal, and therefore equally competent to serve as leaders in the Church. Indeed, most Christians are members of denominations that still haven't taken this on board, despite St Paul's statement in his letter to the first century Galatian Christians that “there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (*Galatians 3:28*)!

Also, perhaps the increasing acceptability of gay and lesbian relationships by wider society is telling **us** that, to quote from one of our hymns, “**We** make [God's] love too narrow by false limits of our own, and we magnify his strictness with a zeal he will not own – For the love of God is broader than the measures of man's mind and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind” (*H&P 230, vv. 5 & 4*).

The Church needs to keep its doors open for **us** to go **outside** not only to witness to our faith and put it into practice by supporting those in need and challenging wrongdoing, but also to learn from those outside. And that's my first main point. We need to keep our church doors open so **we** can go **outside**.

My other main point is that we need to keep those doors open so **others** can come **inside**. In T S Eliot's play "Murder in the Cathedral", there is one scene when Archbishop Thomas Becket is in Canterbury Cathedral before his assassination by four of Henry II's knights, and those with him want to protect him by locking the doors. But he won't have this. He says: "Open the doors, throw open the doors. I will not have the house of prayers, the Church of Christ, the sanctuary, turned into a fortress...The church shall be open to our enemies. Open the door!"

And Becket was right. The doors of the Church should be open to **all**. We risk stopping people from seeing that Jesus is alive today when we allow the Church to seem closed off from the outside world, as we do when our worship is unintelligible to the outsider or when we aren't as clearly committed to justice and peace and the relief of suffering in the world as we are to the worship and fellowship of our own church community. We need to keep our churches **and our minds** open – open, loving and welcoming even to people whose colour or culture or sexuality or life style is different to what we're used to.

Having open doors is not always easy. It may make us want to echo some words of the French Catholic priest Michel Quoist. He wrote: "Lord ... you have forced me to open my door. Now, Lord, I am lost! Outside [people] were lying in wait for me. As soon as I started to open the door I saw them, with outstretched hands, burning eyes, longing hearts. I had to find room for them. They have come from ... all parts of the country, of the world; numberless, inexhaustible. They come bending under heavy loads; loads of injustice, of suffering and sin. Lord, they hurt me! They are in the way, they are everywhere. They are too hungry, they are consuming me! I can't do anything any more; as they come in, they push the door, and the door opens wider. There's no more room for **me** at home."

In a way, opening the doors of our churches and our lives can be a bit like this. For Thomas Becket it meant being hacked to death by the four knights; for Jesus, it meant crucifixion. But with crucifixion comes resurrection; and that piece by Michel Quoist ends with the words: "Don't worry, God says, you have gained all. While people came in to you, I your Father, I your God, slipped in among them."

May that be so for us.

Amen

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, we rejoice because you have opened the door of the kingdom of heaven to us and to other people in all their variety. Help us to hold open to others the doors of our lives and of our Church, your Church, and to recognise you in those who come in. Amen.