

Sermon for 28.4.19 (St. Andrew's Easter 1)

Prayer: God our Father, help us to hear you speaking and may all we receive go with us. AMEN

There's no doubt about it, a locked door is a barrier. Without a key, or a JCB or some kind of explosive there's no way you can get past it. A locked door separates whatever is inside from whatever is outside. It can keep safe, or it can limit and imprison.

Imagine then one side of a door. There's a room occupied by Jesus' disciples, a mixed bunch but gathered together through fear. They're bewildered, yet with flutters of tentative excitement about recent sightings of Jesus. Mary Magdalene insists that she's seen and spoken with him, Peter and John have seen the empty tomb and the discarded grave clothes. And yet, here they all are, locked in, with more anxieties than alleluias.

So that's one side of the door. Now let's take a look on the other side. There's the city, governed by Romans who worship many gods. There are Jewish leaders and teachers of religion upholding their interpretation of the scriptures, and opposed to any who challenge them. But there are others too, ordinary people unconvinced by these role models, who are looking instead for a messiah, and who had thought they might have found him. Among them are the vulnerable, beggars, the sick and disabled, children, and those looking for forgiveness and a new way to live.

So here's the situation then. On one side are those who've been taught by Jesus about life and God, who were sent out to preach and have authority over evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness, and on the other side are the needy. And between them stands that locked door.

So Jesus comes. Unimpeded by such a barrier, suddenly he is there with the disciples, bringing peace and breathing new hope and courage into them. "As the father has sent me, so I send you", he says and inspires and commissions them. The message is clear. We can almost imagine the disciples going off into the sunset Miramax style to accomplish his work.

Almost,..... but not quite. Because a week later the door is still shut. Does some trepidation, some anxiety remain? Forgiving or retaining sins – both are hugely daunting. And not only that, someone has missed out on the gift of peace and the new commissioning.

Thomas, for whatever reason, hasn't been there, and are those disciples just a touch smug I wonder, when they tell him what he's missed?

"You'll never guess what happened to us today! We've seen the Lord!"

You see, Thomas is the one who doesn't leave his phone on, so misses out on meeting his friends in Costa. Thomas is the one who forgets to change his clock at the start of British Summer Time and arrives at church just as the bishop has finished his most inspirational sermon. How would you feel? Gutted? Hardly surprising then that Thomas wants what they've experienced. Why should he believe, just because others have told him he should? He wants his own personal encounter.

Don't we all? Might not we too, having faithfully followed Jesus, feel a sense of disappointment, when we hear others say "We have seen the Lord", if we have not experienced that for ourselves? Would we too not ask for the same up close and personal revelation to help us stay the course?

So Jesus comes once again, bringing his peace and his physical self to Thomas – why would he not? A story of a lost sheep springs to mind. So are his words a rebuke or simply a statement of fact? I'm not sure that's what matters. What does matter is that those words are intended to reach beyond Thomas, for all who don't have the luxury of touching or seeing. Jesus comes to meet not just Thomas's need, but ours. And Thomas's response? "My Lord and my God!" Such a profound experience truly opens his eyes so that he alone responds by affirming Jesus as God.

And so to another door. One week on from Easter our church door is closed but not locked, and here we are one side of it. We too are a mixed bunch: believers, searchers, the simply curious, the lonely perhaps, visitors, but all united in this hour through our worship. We've proclaimed that the Lord is risen and we've sung our praises, hearts and voices uplifted. There are feelings of joy, of thankfulness, of relief, but might there also be lurking something else?

Because on the other side of this door is our community. Outside are those who worship other gods, those who are adamant that the Christian faith is for the naïve, and science is God, those keen to impose their beliefs about life and choices by mocking our alternatives, those who worship self. But outside too are those who've been searching for some kind of different meaning for their lives. Outside are struggling families, teenagers who find nothing better to do than binge drink or take drugs, children who never hear a Bible reading or sing a hymn or say the Lord's prayer. Outside are the vulnerable in need of support of various kinds, and those looking for forgiveness and a new way to live.

So here's the situation then. On one side are all of us here, on the other side, the world, and between us stands a door.

And Jesus comes. Our closed door is no barrier for him. Each week he is here among us in the words we sing, the words we say and the words we hear. He ministers to us through the prayers, through coffee and biscuits and conversation, through the warmth of a handshake or a hug. But that isn't all. Because all that we receive is to give us the courage to move out. We too are commissioned. "As the father has sent me, so I send you". Those words for Jesus' disciples in that room are intended for us too. The message is clear.

And there's the rub. The task is daunting, and we too, if we're honest, are fearful. We're fearful because of our sense of inadequacy, of confusion about what to say, what to do. We're fearful about proclaiming our beliefs in case they are interpreted as being too judgmental of others' lifestyles. We're fearful about teaching children in our non-church schools about our faith in a passionate way, as believers, in case we're seen as indoctrinating them.

How tempting then to turn in on ourselves, to close the door keeping our beliefs safe, and practising our faith inside these boundaries. But places of refuge are not meant to be lived in for ever. And God isn't of course just for us. The door to the world has to stand open so that we can see the view, so that we can pass in and out if we are to fulfil our calling. He's trusting us, challenging us, to show his hands and his side to others. How very sad it would be if we never unlocked and opened our doors, and if we never moved out into the world beyond!

So perhaps it might help us to remember this. Jesus bore the scars of serving others and yes, we will too. Some will mock and make us feel humiliated, some will turn away and we'll feel embarrassed as we try to reach out. But Jesus comes and says, here I am, put your finger here, see my hands, reach out and touch, taste and receive me in bread and the wine, let it fill you, let it inspire you. Let me give you hope and courage, strength to open the doors of your life.

More than anything else, Jesus wants to stand before us and breathe new life into us and say, "Peace be with you."

There's no doubt about it, a locked door is a barrier. But Thomas and the others got up, headed towards the door, walked into the future and changed the world. So may we be empowered to continue the work they began. AMEN