

I wonder how you would feel if the church when it reopens again, whenever that will be, put a big sign outside the door saying that one person in particular would never be allowed back into the church building again. I wonder how you would feel if it was you that wasn't welcome. I'm guessing if there was no evidence of any malicious or wrongdoing, you would be rather annoyed. After all, the Church should be a place of welcome, or as Nicky Gumbel puts it, a hospital for the sick. And in times like right now, thank the Lord that we are seeing many church communities reaching out. Our doors may not be physically open, but the community sure knows that our hearts are in love and kindness.

Here in the context of our reading today we have the story of a man who has been excommunicated from the church – the doors have been properly closed on him. I know you're thinking – that's not the passage I've been reading this morning, and you're right, but in order to read John 10, you've got to start at John 9 which is the story of Jesus healing the blind man on the Sabbath where he rubs dirt in his eyes and gets him to wash in the pool of Siloam.

Obviously once news gets out about this miracle, the Pharisees, those extremely religious Jews are on the hunt to understand what has happened, and particularly the shame of this miracle happening on a Sabbath. So they finally get to question the blind man about the event. The blind man was brutally honest with the Pharisees about the miracle, but they really don't like the lecture they're getting, so they throw him out of the synagogue.

In that deeply religious society, to be driven out of the synagogue was no symbolic punishment; it meant becoming a social outcast. Once you were excommunicated, all doors in society were shut on you. And so as Jesus hears what has happened, he goes out of his way to find this poor guy in order to tell him that one door remains open.

You see the incredible thing about the miracle was not so much that the blind man received his sight, but actually that in doing so his eyes and his heart were now being opened to the sight of his Saviour and so he worshipped him. Folks, when you truly see your Saviour, all you want to do is worship him. But the Pharisees are looking a fight, and Jesus is quick to show them that they may be able to see with their physical eyes, but they are spiritually blind because of their sin.

So why does Jesus now turn things around to talk about gates and sheep? Well I think he wanted to show the Pharisees that although the gate or the door of the physical synagogue had been closed to this once-blind man, the man had entered through a gate or door covered by Jesus which provided restoration and protection in a way that religious rules never could.

Let's think about sheep and gates for a second. Back in the day there was no fence posts and wire holding sheep in like we have. The sheep would have typically stayed in something that was already naturally a barrier – either rocks piled up or even an entrance in the side of a stone bank.

And the gate was not like our galvanised ones today with a nice hinge. It could have been a prickly bush or large rocks which would keep any other predator from coming in to

aggravate the sheep. But most of the time the gate was a man or woman, a shepherd. This person would fill the gap with their physical body across the entrance becoming the gate, and these people would sleep over the entrance. If anyone was to get in and steal the sheep they would have to get past the gatekeeper.

So you can imagine the Pharisees beginning to listen to this parable, and it would have been something that they should have understood, and yet verse 6 of our reading tells us they didn't. The blind man had been healed, but these Pharisees were too stuck in their religious do's and don'ts around an event happening on a Sabbath that they are completely blind to see the analogy.

So Jesus is the gate, and so we probably realise who we are. Yes we are the sheep. Earlier this week I did a bible study online on Psalm 23, that most famous of psalms, but one of things that I spoke about was the fact that sheep feel safe around their shepherd because they know that he takes care of them. He covers the entrance to the pen. That's why David says the Lord is MY shepherd. He doesn't say that the Lord is a shepherd. If we are sheep in the sheep pen, we will only feel safe there if we know the shepherd intimately. Too many people, know about the shepherd, but that's not going to nail it, because it doesn't actually secure in our minds that we can trust him. It's only once you get to know someone that you know to trust them. I wonder do you trust in Jesus today?

In a time such as this people are desperate for protection. When I go out I wear these protective gloves, not just to protect me but to protect the people around me, but today when the Lord is my Shepherd, I know that I come under Jesus' protection, I know that he cares for me, and I know that he is a living gate. I know that if I am outside the gate then I am susceptible to being stolen or destroyed by the values and destruction that is all around our society. I know that I have an enemy in Satan who would keep me from the best God has for me, and therefore when I see the attack coming I know I can be secure around the Shepherd! Is that how you feel today?

Being a sheep within the pen with Jesus standing in the gap is about spiritual protection, and staying spiritually safe requires being under God's guidance. As a sheep that can go astray, I know that he will miss me if I am not there. Just like the story of the prodigal son, my Father, your Father in heaven misses you dreadfully when you're not at home. And so to be spiritually safe means that we are to come under God's spiritual guidance, being enclosed in his will, because it's what God wants from us in this right relationship we have with him. But when sheep are out in the fields, they can go off and explore and if you've been around the countryside you might have seen how they can get snared and trapped. And that is just like our lives. We have the freewill to explore for ourselves, but folks that means we are following a different lead, and if we are honest with ourselves we know like this passage says that we are in danger of following a stranger. It's not the way our Father God wishes us to go. In a world that says that everyone has a right to do whatever they want, yes I understand that, but just because I could smoke 50 cigarettes a day it doesn't mean that I ignorantly do it without understanding the consequences. Our Shepherd does not constrain and restrict us, he's here to protect us. He protects the gate for a reason.

We know it's not the right path, and yet for some they pursue it. Tim Keller writes about the implications of this when he says, "Sheep will sometimes stop and drink from the polluted potholes along the trail, contaminated with the manure and urine from previous flocks. It satisfies the initial thirst, but eventually it riddles them with parasites and disease".

It's so true. And we can come up with all kinds of excuses for heading down a particular path in our lives, we call it exploring don't we, but the bottom line is that we are all weak. I am weak, you are weak, none of us can escape this because we are sheep in need of a shepherd, and Jesus knows ultimately that the Thief isn't interested in anything within the pen other than to kill. If we would only realise how Jesus wants to protect us from the thief. For some of you today I know that you have wandered off, some of you are watching this this morning but we haven't seen you regularly at our Sunday worship. And there's lots of excuses that you might have. Just remember that the doors are always open for you because that's what Jesus is saying to you through this parable. He's teaching all of us about the safety that can be found in his presence. And I can assure you that at the end of this Coronavirus, when it is safe for everyone to be out again, we are going to hold the most incredible party in church to welcome the family back, to welcome the prodigals home, whether you're always here or whether you've not been around for a long time. Jesus welcomes you, we welcome you.

In these specific days where I believe the thief is out to destroy yours and your family's, especially your children's lives with the distraction of lying around, the TV box sets, the gaming, the late nights, the social media, the lack of structure, not knowing whether it's a Sunday or what day it is, let's recognise that Jesus desires for us to come through this with a life brimming over in our sense of his love and protection for his children, that in our homes we are opening the door only to the things that are within God's will, that in this time you hear his voice in prayer and silence, that you study his words – so make a point of joining our weekly bible studies, and delight in the knowledge and stay within his will for your life. Outside are left those things that previously bound you to the world, that dragged you down, that had you fearful and controlled, those things that are outside the freedom that comes through being in God's will. Jesus has made a way for us to enter into a life free of these things and now's a time to rediscover them. He wants you to see life in all of it's fullness that is his Kingdom, so stay in that pen, and do all you can to keep seeing the Shepherd.