



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

#### **4th Sunday of Easter Year A**

***NOT 'My Way' but 'Thy Way', O Lord.***

Readings: *Acts 2: 14, 36-41, Ps 22, 1 Peter 2: 20-25, John 10: 1-10*

It was a cold winter evening, several light years ago when I was at the Anglican Seminary in Cambridge – appropriately based in Jesus Lane. A few of us remained, by now in the early hours, in the upstairs bar room warmed by the open fire and several pints of home brew. It was the aftermath of a particularly aggressive debate over the thorny matter of the Virgin Birth during which the heretical lobby – later to take over the C of E – had been finally driven into retreat by a particularly animated defence of the doctrine by my subsequent lifelong friend who had fulminated the orthodox position while standing on the table. Passions run high when salvation is at stake. As we bathed in the glow of the log fire (and our own righteousness) there seemed to be an unexplained rapping coming from the window. As we were on the first floor this was not likely but it was persistent. Finally and reluctantly we drew the great curtain aside – to reveal our most eccentric member, monocle firmly screwed into his right eye, apparently standing on air and enquiring if, as he had parted company with his key, we would be so good as to let him in. 'G' was returning from one of his notorious 'Monarchist Society' bashes – like the Bullingdon Club where a lot of public school hearties get riotously drunk and smash up the place, returning in the

morning to pay for the damage and be assured by the grateful serfs that their custom is much valued.

'G' was in fact suspended in space attached to this life only by the ancient heavily rusted drainpipe. Our suggestion that he crawl in through the window was rejected out of hand. He would slide back down the drainpipe and be let in through the main gate. 'Only burglars come in through the window', he insisted. And so it was.

It is an image that has stuck with me ever since when thinking about Jesus' image of the Gate, the Door. Generally speaking if you saw a man clambering through a window, you might reasonably suspect that he was not the householder, not a legitimate entrant and that his intentions were not benign.

So with today's image. Jesus employs the repetitive use of the Divine Name constantly in the Gospel of St John. We are more familiar with the more dynamic images of 'I am the Good Shepherd' or 'The Way' or 'The Vine' or 'The Light of the World' or 'The Bread of Life' or 'The Resurrection and the Life'. Somehow 'The Gate' seems static, functional, unglamorous. Nevertheless it is of huge significance.

The first encounter with 'gates' is at the 'Fall of Man' when, exiled from Paradise, the Gates of Eden close behind him and are thenceforth guarded by the whirling, flaming swords of the Cherubim who, thereby, prevent our return.

At the end of things we are given a picture of St Peter sitting at the Gates of

Pearl, the entry to the Heavenly Jerusalem, the keyholder monitoring all those who seek entry and eternity.

In between, in the long history of Man, the gates of the city have symbolised both the practical road of ingress and the place that needed most defending when besieged by an enemy.

So when Jesus declares Himself to be the Gate of the Sheepfold, He is declaring that, for the security of the flock, there is only one way in and that is through Him. It is as stern a statement of uniqueness as His response to Thomas when Jesus says, 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life – no man comes to the Father but by me.'

Furthermore there is both an invitation to legitimate entry to all men and a fundamental rejection of those who seek to climb in by another way. Those who do not enter by the Gate are not shepherds but rustlers, thieves and vandals.

In an age where the creeping heresy of 'universalism' (everybody goes to Heaven) robs the Gospel of its urgency and the sacrifice of Christ of its entire purpose if we do not need salvation, the Gate remains a powerful image. It drives away the false notions of the popular nostrum of religious charlatans that there are many ways up the mountain and that the multi-faith smorgasbord is somehow better than the Last Supper.

It rebuts the modern misunderstanding that we must enculturate Christ. The aim of this apparently noble enterprise was to enable Christ to speak to different cultures the one universal truth of Himself. It has come

increasingly to be a means of reinventing an imaginary Christ convenient to the culture itself.

The Good Shepherd is also the Gate of the Sheepfold. He is the sole master of the entry. He is the sole defender of the Sheep. He is the fortress against the depredations of the enemy and all who, in deep disguise and in the service of the enemy, seek the destruction of the Flock.

We can point to no other as the way into the fold but Jesus Christ Himself – not least because He has told us so but also because history attests this truth. False shepherds will tell you that there are other gates – and like most convincing liars they are not entirely wrong. There are other gates but they are not the gates of Heaven and indeed those other gates were trampled beneath Jesus' feet in the hidden work of Holy Saturday and we would not wish our worst enemy entry there.