

JOHN 10:1-10
GATEKEEPERS?

Gatekeepers: Who are the gatekeepers in our community? It is not an idea we use much here; These two ladies in the picture are the gatekeepers in their village in Cambodia. The woman in white, her name is Somnin and when we visited Cambodia last year, she took us around her village and showed us the work that CHO is doing in her village with the cow bank etc. She and others are part of a self-help group which saves money each month so that they can develop their village in ways that they need and CHO works alongside them, supporting them as best they can. She is the gatekeeper of the village: if CHO wants to work in her village, she is the one who needs to say "yes". Somnin will allow them to come into her village or not! If Somnin says "yes" they can come, but if Somnin says "no" then they can do nothing. It is not Somnin on her own who does this, but she does this in concert with the rest of the self-help group around her; they want their village to receive only what is good and that will make life in their village better; at the same time they want to protect their village from bad outside influences. They are the gatekeepers.

Who are the gatekeepers in our community? I'm not sure that we have the same idea, but there are people who work for the good of the community and who look to work for its good. There was a time, in history, when the church would have been the only gatekeeper of every community: if the church didn't like something, then it would not happen, all in the name of the moral good of the community. The Community Council works as a kind of gatekeeper, working hard to make sure that, for example, the community doesn't lose its banking facility and that some of us will suffer as a result; they are trying to make sure that only good things happen to our community. Who are the gatekeepers of the church? When at the door, those of you engaged in the ministry to welcome to people on a Sunday, you are more than just the person who hands out the hymnbook; someone coming up the steps will either be gathered in by your smile and welcome or will be turned away because they feel that you are making this a forbidding place.

We are all gatekeepers of the Christian faith to someone! Who do you know who is asking you questions about being a Christian? Your children? Your grandchildren? A friend? The person you work with? A neighbour? How do you respond to their questions? Openly and gladly, or do you give the impression that they are a nuisance and that you can't be bothered to answer? The way we are with these people, and the way in which we live our lives, will either welcome and gather them into the Christian faith and the church, or will make them turn away because they will feel as if the gate is being closed in their faces. We are gatekeepers for them. How do we make sure that as gatekeepers, we keep the gate open? How do we make sure that we are gatekeepers with grace, rather than people who want to keep the door shut to intruders?

Jesus is the gatekeeper of our salvation! He uses a picture that everyone in His culture would understand; not so much with us, though we live on the edge of sheep-culture. The Palestinian shepherd would be a well-known character: there were sheep everywhere and people would see shepherds on the roads, the hills, in the villages, leading their sheep. The way in which shepherds work is different now, as we said earlier and the Palestinian shepherd leads his sheep, goes ahead of them, calling them by name and the sheep hear his voice and follow the voice they know. The Palestinian shepherd lived for his sheep, to make sure that they had all they needed, food, water, and he would defend and protect them. He would give his all for the sake of his sheep. At night, he would sleep across the gate of the sheepfold to protect his sheep from danger, wild animals, thieves and the like. *"I am..." (John 10:9)* This is one of 7 "I am" sayings in John, where Jesus speaks of Himself in these ways to help us understand something important about Him. At the gate, He is the gatekeeper of our salvation; we come to God through Jesus. No matter who we are, the gate is open for us to come to God; Jesus, the gate, opens the way.

There is a contrast: “*I am...*” (*John 10:7f*) Not everyone has the good of the sheep at heart. Some have bad intentions: He talks about “*thieves and robbers*” who don’t use gate, but who come in over the wall, away from the door, trying to damage the sheep or steal them. There was a story of 50 sheep being stolen in Morayshire last week! Others are strangers who try to steal the sheep away, but the sheep won’t go with them because they do not recognise the voice of strangers. Thieves, robbers, strangers – these would all seem to be talking about the religious leaders of the time, the Pharisees and others, and we know from other places that Jesus speaks about them as keeping people out of the kingdom by the burdens they put on people’s shoulders, nit-picking. He talks about them as looking for their own glory, for people to praise them and honour them; they pride themselves in their so-called spiritual life rather than looking to serve the needs of the people; for the Pharisees some people are already beyond the pale, sinners and foreigners to be excluded rather than welcomed with the grace of God.

Nowhere is that contrast clearer than in what Jesus has come to do: “*The thief...*” (*John 10:10*) No thief is out to do good; he breaks into your house only to do damage. Jesus sees religious leaders who are out only to do damage by their attitudes, and these people still exist, out to criticise and blame, out for their own agenda, out to keep people away from the kingdom. On the other hand, Jesus came to bring life and to bring life in its best possible way. Jesus is the gatekeeper of our salvation and He came into the world to do good for us and to give us everything that is good in life. Other places in the New Testament will describe the blessings of God that come to us because of Jesus and for faith, and when we read these great long lists, we get an idea of what it is that Jesus has done for us; this is life in all its fullness.

Some of you are fans of Monty Python: *The Life of Brian* is a spoof on Hollywood’s telling of religious stories. There is a scene in which the gang ask the question “What did the Romans ever do for us?” and the members of the gang begin to make suggestions; John Cleese’s character is getting rather annoyed by these suggestions. He ends with: “*so, apart from better sanitation and medicine and education and irrigation and public health and roads and a freshwater system and baths and public order... what have the Romans done for us?*” To which some bright spark adds “*Brought us peace!*” (*Life of Brian*) What did Jesus do for us? The list is even longer with a whole lot of gifts and qualities that go to the very deepest part of our being and our life: forgiveness, grace, peace, hope, heaven, friendship with God, we are God’s children, prayer, His Spirit, strength, help, being with us always and everywhere – this is life to the full! This is not just a little life, nor a slightly better version of the life everyone else enjoys; this is life to the full and in which the life of the age to come breaks into our world and our life today. This is what Jesus has done for us; it is far bigger than we ever know; there is far more than we think, but this is life to enjoy and revel in; this is what Jesus has done for us; He is the gatekeeper of our salvation.

There are three responses:

1. We need to put our faith in Jesus. He is the gatekeeper of our salvation. No-one else will give us this gift of life; not the church, not me, only Jesus. He is the gatekeeper, so we need to put our trust in Jesus. A young man was wandering; he had lost his way a bit, and was not sure which way to go next, or how to make his way in the world. Someone told him about Jesus and he wanted to know more; he discovered that Jesus could give him life in a way he’d never known it before, with forgiveness and grace. He believed and put his trust in Jesus and the gift of life was his. We need to put our faith in Jesus.
2. We need to listen to Jesus and follow Him. That’s what the sheep were doing for the shepherd, listening for his voice and following him. The Lord is our shepherd and our job is to follow Him. He loves us and will provide for us; He has even given His life for us. Listen for His voice and learn to be the kind of people He wants us to be. We listen to Jesus in the Bible; listen to Jesus through the preaching and church; we listen for Jesus

in the counsel and advice of others; we listen for Jesus in other ways too. That is what matters in the end; ultimately it does not matter that you listen to me as I preach; ultimately, it does not matter that you conform to the ways the Church teaches; it does matter that we listen for Jesus and for what He wants of us.

3. We need to point others to Jesus. Tell someone the stories of Jesus; let them hear what Jesus did or said; tell them the stories. Let others see Jesus in us: by our attitudes and the way we think, by the way we speak and the things we say, that the ways in which we behave are shaped by grace – let people see Jesus in us. Everything we are should be shaped by the grace of God, shaped by the love of Jesus for us and our love for others. We point others to Jesus by the kind of people we are, being winsome, generous, kind, compassionate. As soon as we become hard-hearted and critical and mean-spirited, we turn people away and close the gate!

Gatekeepers – it is an idea that I find fascinating; who are the gatekeepers of what is good in our society? We are! What do we approve of? What do we allow to happen by our silence? What good things do we actively promote? We are gatekeepers of the gospel: to pass it on to others, to the next generation, to our family and friends, to guard it and make sure it is not twisted or changed. Jesus is the gatekeeper of our salvation: He gives us everything that is good; He loves us and cares for us; He gives His life for us, so that we might have life to the full; He blesses us with far more blessing than we ever understand. *“I am...” (John 10:9)*