

Fling Wide the Gates – Sermon for Palm Sunday 02 April, 2023
based on Matthew 21: 1-11 (Rev Phil Wootton)

Gates and doorways are important – places for coming and going, meeting and greeting. They give a sense of security and belonging, a place you can feel at home and at peace. Gates give a first impression to visitor and passer-by: if the gates are cared for, probably the people care; if they're rotting away, well, what does that say? More important, perhaps, do the gates communicate a message of welcome, or do they say, 'Keep out'?

Church gates and doorways in particular matter. They communicate something about this place being different. Traditionally, it's the churchyard wall that designates holy space, and the lychgate gives access to it. Either side of the gate, you are, of course, in God's presence. But inside is set aside. Inside, that presence is acknowledged and recognised and there for all to see. Here is a place of peace and prayerfulness – in some sense a portal to God's nearer presence. So, it matters that passageway should be as easy as possible for all people. The gate can also be a kind of spiritual control point. A prayer by Thomas Ken expresses this idea well:

O God, make the door of this house wide enough to receive all who need human love and fellowship; narrow enough to shut out all envy, pride and strife. Make its threshold smooth enough to be no stumbling-block to children, nor to straying feet, but rugged and strong enough to turn back the tempter's power. God make the door of this house the gateway to your eternal kingdom. (Thomas Ken, 1637-1711)

Jerusalem, like most ancient city, had walls around it, which means it had to have gates. On Palm Sunday, Jesus entered the city probably through what's now called the Lion Gate, opposite the Mount of Olives. He came in peace. He came riding on a donkey. He came as a pilgrim, one of thousands, for the Passover Festival – all singing Psalms and shouting praise. In jubilation, they call out: 'Fling wide the gates. Be lifted up you everlasting doors.' Pilgrims at this festival had done the same for hundreds of years, but on this day they did something more. They had a man riding on a donkey. Everyone knew what this meant. Everyone knew this was what Zechariah had prophesied. Everyone acclaimed him the Prince of Peace, Messiah, come not by military might but by popular acclamation and chosen by God – the anointed one returning to his Temple. 'Fling wide the gates. Be lifted up you everlasting doors. And the King of glory will come in!'

On the other side of town, at around the same time, probably through what is now the Jaffa Gate, a different procession was taking place. A company of soldiers arrived from Caesarea and marched through the streets to the Antonia Fortress. At its head, imperial prefect Pontius Pilate – possibly riding a war horse. These soldiers were needed, it was said, to keep the peace during the 'excitable' times of Passover. Their manner of arrival at the gates communicated, 'Open up, or we'll batter your door down.' *Pax Romana* – peace by threat; peace by naked force. The showdown between two styles of peace-maker would shape the days to come.

On Palm Sunday, we stand on the threshold of Holy Week. Today we join with those pilgrims coming to Jerusalem, our songs inspired by the Psalms of old. As we go on into Holy Week, we know this ebullient mood cannot last. With Jesus we shed tears over Jerusalem, and so over the world: 'If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes' (Luke 19: 42). We weep at barriers erected, doors closed, and people kept apart from one another, and from God.

On Friday, the procession goes the opposite way, out from the city, led by a man carrying a cross. Outside a different gate, this cross will be erected at a place where all who come and go will see it. The cross looks like one big stop sign: do not come this way! It seems like all the hopes and dreams of the Jesus movement have come to a shuddering halt – that victory is to the powers of division and fear and terror and injustice. But, at the moment of his death, one other barrier is broken down. In the Temple, a great curtain blocks the entrance to the Holy of Holies, saying this place is too holy, too close to God, for the likes of you. When Jesus dies, this great curtain is torn in two from top to bottom. Access denied becomes open access. The gift of forgiveness and reconciliation achieved by Jesus means that the meaning of the cross changes. No longer is the cross a no entry sign; it has become an open gate to life and peace – a portal to the eternity.