

15 May 2011 St Michaels Studio City
A Easter 04
RCL John 10.1-10 1 Peter 2.19-25

Gatekeepers and Gates
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One of the dirty little secrets of our government in Washington, D.C., and in Sacramento as well, is that almost nothing is done there just on its merits. That it's a good idea, that it's fair, that it's the right thing to do, has little to do with its chances of becoming law, of helping citizens live well. If you want something done, something more than a personal favor from your Senator or Congressman (who is, of course, trading that favor for your vote), if you want something substantive accomplished, you have to hire an expensive – they're all expensive – lobbyist to pressure the right people with the right words or the right gift or the right secrets to get it done. It's a shock to what we learned in our ninth grade civics class about government, but it's the truth about today's government, and we can trace this unofficial, unelected element of our democracy almost back to the founding of the Republic. You have to know someone who knows the system in order to get things done. You have to know a gatekeeper.

Perhaps we shouldn't be as surprised as all that, because Jesus talks about the same thing, as we read in today's gospel reading from the sublime John. He goes on to call Himself the good shepherd as opposed to the hired hand, a picture we're more familiar with, especially in the light of Psalm 23. I hesitate to compare Jesus to a Washington or Sacramento lobbyist, but there are *some* elements in common. Jesus says you have to know someone who knows the system in order to get in. You don't just waltz up on your own. That's a little hard for us Americans to accept, accustomed as we are to our independence and to our rights.

But not to worry. Jesus says that He Himself is not only the gatekeeper but the gate. He's the one who knows the divine system, the secrets of getting us into the safety and joy of the divine sheepfold. And, whereas in Washington or Sacramento, we have to part with a great deal of money in order to persuade the lobbyist to take us on, in the New Jerusalem that Jesus is building from innumerable sheepfolds we only have to part with our arrogance. Though one of our important life tasks is to build a strong sense of self, proper boundaries, an appropriate self-regard, when it comes to living with God we have to learn not to stand on our rights. God says in effect that what we are by right is well and good but that She has something much better in mind for us, something that is not ours by right but that is ours by gift, undeserved, by pure good-will on the part of God. We have to give up our sense of entitlement that we are good people and let God take us to the greatness He intends for us. We have to trust God, to have faith in God's goodness, to believe that God is on our side. Instead of trying to climb over the fence on our own, we have to come to the One who gives us entrance, who brings us into Himself in order to give us all that God wants to give us. It's a humbling experience. It's humbling to realize that God is not impressed with our goodness. It's humbling to see God working in a unique fashion in a Galilean carpenter two thousand years ago. It's humbling to accept life on terms of God's Spirit, who doesn't seem to be much interested in our comfort but

rather in our sanctity. It's all so humbling, but there is a certain comfort in knowing that we don't have to do it all ourself. Enter by the gate that is Jesus the Crucified, the One who showed His love by what He did, being crucified by the injustices of the world, just as you and I are. He can be trusted.

But let us be honest with ourselves. The flock that we belong to, the flock that Jesus shepherds, the people that Jesus fashions for Himself, is not just a bunch of indolent sheep munching grass in green pastures and being led to pools of quiet waters. We walk through valleys of threatening death. We are kept safe, but the threat is nonetheless there. The promise is not that we will escape hurt and death but rather that God is with us in it all and that we will be comforted and strengthened for how we must live.

There is a certain kind of Christianity preached in some quarters today that is not Christianity at all. It is quite popular, because it is what people want to believe. It is the false gospel of prosperity, that if we accept God in Christ, we will have health and wealth in this life as well as salvation hereafter. The salvation hereafter is certainly promised when we trust ourselves to God, but the other part is nowhere in the New Testament that I read. God is not interested in torturing His people but neither are we given an easy ride. People continue to suffer after their conversions to Christ; we see it in the New Testament; we see it in our own lives. Now here comes the zinger: the suffering is not just accidental, not just life as we know it. The suffering is part of how God is re-creating the world. He does that by making the unjust suffering and death of Jesus the center of the universe and the beginning of a whole new way of belonging to God. Then God honors us by making us part of Her energies of re-creation in Christ. Listen to what Peter writes in his letter that we read today: "After all, God chose you to suffer as you follow in the footsteps of Christ,..." (1 Peter 2.21) God chose us to suffer. That's not what I want to hear. On the other hand, I do want to know that my suffering is not pointless, that God can make something good out of the idiocies of a world where graft and corruption are rampant, where government is bought, where the vulnerable are exploited by the powerful, where children die, where faith is betrayed, where hunger and war stalk the land.

I don't think God brings these awful things into lives that would otherwise not have them. I think God says that in an imperfect world these things come to everyone. I think that God says that He will be with us in the dark valleys, *always* with us, that goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives and that we will live in the house of the Lord forever. I think God points us to the One God loved the most, Jesus, the Crucified One. I think that God wants us to see that our crucifixions are just as valuable, just as beloved. I think God wants us to see our glory in the honor He does us. God wants us to see that we will be crucified for the salvation of the world, but that, if we come into Christ's sheepfold through the suffering Christ, if we allow this in our lives, the crucifixion pales before the glory of resurrection, a new life that God can hardly wait to bring us into. Let the crucifixion go. The greater truth is the resurrection, in Jesus' life and in ours. Let the gatekeeper show us the way. Let the gate be our opening into the life of Jesus, the life of God's chosen. Jesus is the gateway to the best life we can ever have.