

It's the first time since Easter Day that we have heard a Gospel reading on a Sunday which is not an appearance of the resurrected Jesus, either at the tomb, in the upper room or on the road to Emmaus.

Today we are with Jesus in Jerusalem. It is from here that he sets out in the next Chapter to Bethany when he hears of the death of Lazarus. But for now he is spending his time walking, teaching, healing and debating with the Pharisees. And it's in this context that we hear our Gospel reading this morning. The Pharisees are offended by Jesus healing a blind man on the Sabbath and, publicly embarrassed by the healed man's responses to their questions, they are now firmly set on dealing with Jesus. And of course, Jesus knows this as he speaks to them.

Jesus gives us one of what in John's Gospel have become known as his "I am" sayings. There are seven of these: I am the bread of life, I am the vine, I am the light of the world, I am the good shepherd, I am the resurrection and the life, I am the way, the truth and the life and this one: I am the gate for the sheep.

The very use of this turn of phrase would have infuriated the Pharisees. The phrase "I am" was echoing the voice of God from the burning bush when Moses asked God his name and he replied "I am who I am". By using "I am" in this way, Jesus was not only uttering the name of God – considered by Jews to be too holy to speak, but was using it to refer to himself! Jesus making himself equal to God. That the Pharisees simply could not accept.

As Jesus speaks, God's people become the sheep and to enter into the sheepfold is to have a relationship with him. There is only one way to have a relationship with God and that is through Jesus. Anyone who tries to enter into a relationship with God without acknowledging the Lordship of Jesus is not going through the gate who is Jesus himself.

But in a sense I think what the Pharisees are doing is even worse. You see it wasn't as if they were trying to have a relationship with God and getting it wrong. They weren't interested in a relationship with God, didn't really want to know anything about God. What they were interested in was the prestige and the public acclamation that came from people *thinking* that they had a relationship with God. They were keen to promote the myth that they knew God, knew all about him and that if anyone else wanted to get close, they had to come to them.

The Pharisees existed to keep people at arm's length from God, to enjoy the power and the influence which their position afforded. They were indeed the thieves and the bandits that Jesus accused them of being - stealing away the chance for ordinary people to know God, the chance for people to know that God loved them. And here comes Jesus telling people that God is there for them, that they can know him, love him, have him as a part of their everyday lives. All they had to do was put their trust in Jesus.

Well that would never do. The Pharisees could see their power and prestige and influence evaporating before them. The thieves and the bandits had to deal with Jesus, to keep these people away from God. And Jesus calls them out on it right to their faces.

I am the gate for the sheep. Through Jesus the way to God stands open for people to walk through freely. They and we can enter the sheepfold, get to know God, realise his great love for them and live their lives in communion with him.

I am the gate for the sheep. Working as I do for the prison service it's hard for me to think of gates without thinking of the prisons that I visit. In a prison the gate isn't simply a thing that opens and shuts. The gate is a building or even a group of buildings within which is contained a microcosm of

human existence. The gate has its own set of staff who oversee the going out and the coming in of everyone and everything which needs to come in and out of the prison.

It is in the gate where the nervous young prisoner arrives on his first night in prison, getting his first view of life inside. It is to the gate that the jubilant but also anxious prisoner comes on his release day after a long sentence – waiting apprehensively for that metal door to slide open wondering what the world will be like on the outside, wondering if there will be anyone there to meet him, wondering if all her promises to stand by him and that she still loves him actually meant anything.

It is to the gate that the new officer comes on their first day in the job, crisp white shirt, shiny shoes, keen, nervous, trying not to let it show, failing. It is to the gate that the long serving staff come, day after day, fed up, tired, discouraged. It is in the gate that they read the heartbreaking notice that someone has taken their lives overnight. It is in the gate that the staff gather after an incident, uniforms stained with blood, sweat, tears and worse. In the gate they wait anxiously for news of a fallen colleague taken off in an ambulance – the Chaplain standing alongside them, hugging, praying, passing sweets.

It is to the gate that the bread, the newspapers and the toilet roll come, stacked high or packed on pallets in the back of lorries. Through the gate the rubbish is taken out in skips, searched carefully lest some opportunist has found a way to climb inside.

I am the gate for the sheep says Jesus. The gate is not just the way in and out, it is the provider of everything that is necessary for life and the way of getting rid of everything that is not needed, the receptacle of all human emotion, good and bad.

Psalm 121 v8 says “The LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore”. For me this is the essence of Jesus being the gate for us his sheep. It is not just letting us in and out. It is being involved in the stuff of our daily lives, the drama and the emotion, the routine and the drudgery. As we acknowledge Jesus as the gate, we acknowledge his presence, his involvement and his transforming love for every aspect of our lives – the good, the bad and the ugly.

So this week, may you remember God’s presence with you in all you do. His great love for you in every aspect of your life and may the Lord, the gate for the sheep, truly watch over your going out and your coming in now and always.

Amen.