

gates, gatekeepers, Christ, and God's welcome for all

a sermon preached on the
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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by mother emily fraser

the lections: acts 2.42-47; psalm 23; 1 peter 2.1-10; john 10.1-10

Today's readings have a complex common theme for us to consider – that of the notion of God's elect people, chosen and beloved, and saved.

One of the readings, the first, from the Acts of the Apostles, depicts an idyllic Christian community, who live joyfully, holding all things in common, who eat and pray together and whose numbers ever increase as the faith spreads. In a world marred by warfare, violence, greed, corruption, where resources are unequally divided and where poverty exists in nations where some live with unimaginable wealth, it sounds impossibly perfect. It sounds like some kind of earthly paradise where humanity has finally learned how to care for one another and share their resources, to live out their faith guided by unconditional love and unrestricted generosity.

The psalm also establishes a notion of an elect, a specially anointed people. These anointed are beloved of God, and marked as such, in the presence of foes and enemies. Similarly, the reading from the first letter of Peter ends with a declaration that the recipients (and us as the latter day readers) are the elect, the chosen race, the royal priesthood, the holy nation, God's own people, called to proclaim God's works as people brought from darkness into light. We are the beneficiaries of a great gift – specific salvation and redemption.

From these texts we have a clear depiction of the old covenant, where God's chosen people are selected and are the recipients of God's love, mercy and grace. And then we have the passage from the Gospel according to John.

It too establishes a clear dichotomy – those who have entered by the gate, and those who have not. Those who don't enter by the gate are thieves and bandits, and those who enter by the gate are legitimate. The sheep instinctually know who to follow – they'll follow their shepherd, but not the imposter.

And it becomes explicit when, in his speech, Jesus drops the analogy and directly states that he is the gate, the way, and those who 'enter' by him, believe in him, will be saved. He promises life to those who believe.

But here we begin to have a difference in meaning, a difference in how the concept of election works and functions. And a very different notion of salvation. Jesus is not talking about the continuation of the old covenant of election; through the new covenant all will be welcome. All will be chosen, and none will be overlooked. The new covenant is shown in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, and his willing death on the cross as an outpouring of love and forgiveness.

Passages such as these have been and still are used to establish a notion of the elect, God's chosen who can do no wrong because they are Godly people who are righteous and who are saved, destined for paradise. These passages can and have been used to justify a belief in Christian superiority, of exclusivity of salvation which condemns all unbelievers (or even believers who differ too much from our own notions of acceptability) and cuts them off.

Using such arguments to imply some kind of superiority negates Christ's message of universal love, of universal welcome. It misses the entire point in making redemption seem to be something which is earned rather than something which God offers freely and with generosity beyond measure.

Christ didn't go around the gathered crowds before the feeding of the 5000 and tell certain groups of them to sling their hooks. He told them all to sit down and eat. They were all welcome to be fed.

Christ didn't tell the gathered disciples in the upper room that the Eucharist was only for a certain number of them, and the rest could go elsewhere for the night. They all ate the bread, drank the cup. They were all welcome.

We are not called to love only those who conform to a certain standard, who ascribe to the same views and values we do, who pass some kind of litmus test - we are simply called to love. And that means to love all. Because the reality of Easter, of God's outpouring of love from the pain and suffering of the cross, of the rising from the tomb, is that all are redeemed. Christ's love comes with no conditions. No quid pro quo that must be performed in order to qualify. No quiz that must be answered correctly or you'll be turned away with no chance of a retake.

The idea of the gate and the gatekeeper, in the light of the other readings we've heard today, can make it sound that some people will find the gate firmly closed, and for some, special and worthy others it will open to admit them. But Christ is the gate which is permanently open, no matter who we are, no matter what we've done ... Thank God for that.

curate.emily@stjohnscamberwell.org.au