

difference between the standards of the world and the will of God. They felt very close to the events of Easter and Pentecost, because these events were so recent. They saw the hand of God working in their lives, effecting “signs and wonders” through the ministry of the Apostles. The Book of Acts tells us that *fear came upon every soul*, and this we must understand not as fright, but as the fruit of awe and wonderment that leads people to be very careful about how they live. We read that *they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.* [Act 2:42] And God added to their numbers on a daily basis, as people became convinced of the truth of the Gospel message and as they began to experience the power of the Lord working in their lives.

If we yearn to experience the power of our faith, if we would like to see our numbers grow daily or weekly like the early Church, there is a model for us to follow. The point of entry into Heaven has been clearly defined for us. There is only one gate to eternal life, and that is through the Person of Jesus Christ. Let us therefore examine our own lives, as well as our life together as a Parish, to see whether other situations or teachings are distracting us from our true purpose. Be encouraged. Jesus really loves each of us. He will continue to show us the way, and to encourage us to say “yes” to all that He can offer us.

Χάρις τῷ θεῷ, εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος, Ἀμήν

EASTER 4a

2014-05-11

PARISH OF GEORGINA—S. JAMES’ CHURCH, SUTTON

The days and weeks immediately following Easter are an exciting time for the Christian community. We remember with joy the wondrous miracle of the Resurrection. We hear again and again the Good News that Jesus lives, and that His victory over sin and death has won for His people a place in His nearer Presence. The essence of the Gospel involves rich, full, abundant life in the bosom of Him Who created us, and Whose love for us will never die.

And as we reflect on the history and the meaning of the Resurrection, we begin to look back at some of our Lord’s teachings, with new or renewed understanding.

This morning’s Gospel lesson is part of an extended teaching on our relationship with Jesus. Jesus uses a number of metaphors to describe our dependence upon Him, and to help us to understand why our relationship with Him is so very important. For example, Jesus calls Himself the “gate” of the sheepfold. Gates are interesting inventions. They keep some things in and other things out. The gate on the sheepfold ensures that the sheep in the flock won’t wander away, or be exposed to danger. Predators are kept out, while the sheep can graze in safety within.

And how appropriate to speak about sheep! Sheep are part of the agricultural scene in the Holy Land, as indeed they are in many countries. They are animals that require some care. If they wander off, they might not be able to find their way back home. Domestic sheep thrive when they are protected from harm, and when their other needs are met. By using sheep as the subject of His teaching, Jesus reminds us of our dependence upon God, Who loves and cares for us. And He

reminds us (very gently) that if or when we wander off, there is a great danger that we might become lost forever.

Now: if we think of the sheepfold as being that place of nurture and protection in the Presence of the Shepherd, then perhaps we might come to understand this as being a good description of Heaven, where, in the Nearer Presence of our God, we are completely nurtured and protected throughout all eternity.

And how do we get to heaven? Here our Lord's teachings differ considerably from the teaching of the world around us. Jesus calls Himself the gate of the sheepfold, and reminds us that the only legitimate entry into the fold is through the gate. The only legitimate way to heaven, according to Jesus, is through Him.

Today it's considered "politically correct" to suggest that there might be many approaches to God, and therefore, even those whose religious beliefs reject the teachings of the Gospel, stand as great a chance of going to heaven as do we. Even the Church, in its attempt to be broad-minded, has tolerated this view, as we've entered into discussions with those whose understanding of God certainly does not include Jesus, or barely includes God as a living Being. Yet neither the Old nor the New Testament agree with this.

Jesus is very specific in what He teaches us. He is the means alone by which we are to approach God the Father. Jesus is the One Whose sacrifice on the Cross of Calvary won for us the gift of eternal life. Jesus chose us, each one of us, because He wants us to share in His great gift.

And how does He describe those who would try to enter the fold other than through Him? *Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man*

*is a thief and a robber; but he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep.* [n 10.1] Satan is a thief and a robber whose purpose is to steal souls away from Christ. We must always be on our guard against him. But there are also those who want to get into heaven the easy way, who desire the *gift* of heaven, but not the *Giver*. These, Jesus calls "thieves and robbers."

To modern-day sensibilities, there is something mildly offensive about this distinction. Yet elsewhere in the Gospel, Jesus speaks about separating people at the judgement like sheep and goats. He goes to considerable length also to remind us that the gate to heaven is not as wide as the world would have us believe, but rather is very narrow. We could understand this as being exclusive, and perhaps the world might interpret it as such, but I don't believe that is an accurate interpretation either of His nature or of His will for us.

I can find no evidence anywhere in the Scriptures that God enjoys casting people aside—quite the contrary! He has done everything possible, including sending Jesus to live and die as one of us, in order to show us that He loves us and that He wants us to love Him and to enjoy His fellowship. I believe that the narrow focus of Jesus' teaching is designed to help us decide just what we want. Do we want to be part of His Kingdom? Do we want to live forever? Do we really want what He yearns to offer us? If we're sure that we do want these things, then we must focus and prepare according to His requirements. There is no question that He wants us—indeed, He does!—but if we want Him, we must let Him know. We do this whenever we decide to follow Jesus, to trust Him, to love Him, and to reject as non-Christian and therefore as being dangerous to our souls, those things which run contrary to what the Bible actually says.

The early Church understood very clearly the choices they had to make. They understood that there exists a fundamental