

The Narrow Door **Luke 13:22-35**

I saw this week in the news that the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists has advanced the Doomsday Clock by one minute, with the clock now standing at 5 minutes to midnight. Well, as we see Jesus moving and journeying towards Jerusalem, the clock is ticking down on him as well, as he heads inexorably to the capital, and his death.

But as he travels someone asks him a question. V23, 'Lord, will those who are saved be few?'

Don't duck the question

Now why did the person ask that question? What prompted him to ask about the number of those who will be saved?

Well, if you remember, Jesus has been warning that judgment is coming, that he has come to bring division rather than peace, and we've heard him urge people to rightly interpret the times. So there's a sense of expectancy in the air, that the end is approaching, that doomsday is coming. Then the scholars tell us that this was a question being thrown about by the rabbis of Jesus' time: would all Israel be saved, or just a few, and how many gentiles would get in? So this question was of contemporary significance. It was being debated on the 1st century equivalents of chat shows and blog posts.

But we also know from John's gospel that some people who have been following Jesus have dropped by the wayside. Under the challenge of His teaching they backoff, and whilst the crowds still come out to hear him, the numbers who follow him are beginning to thin. So looking around, someone asks him, 'Lord, will those who are saved be few?' I mean, is it just going to be a few frozen chosen, Jesus?

Well, do you notice how Jesus answers? He takes this person's question and he turns it around. He turns it from, 'will the saved be few?' to 'what about you? Will you be among the saved?'

In CS Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*, on a number of occasions one of the children asks Aslan, the great lion, about one of the other characters in the story – if this other person had acted differently, if their response had been other than it was, how would things have been? How will things turn out, Aslan, for this other person? And Aslan's stock answer is, 'child, no-one is told anyone else's story. You are only told your own.'

And Jesus turns a potential theological debate about *others* into a personal heart-challenge to the questioner and those listening. He takes a discussion about the nebulous, 'those-over-there' and says, 'instead, let's talk about you, about your story, let's talk about *your* fate. Will the saved be few? Rather, will you be among them?'

Now, whilst I'm not suggesting the questioner is doing this, still you and I at times will try and wriggle out from under the claims that Jesus puts upon our lives by trying to deflect attention onto others. So when it comes to salvation and Christ's call to yield to Him you might try and keep Him at arms length with 'yes,

but, what about those who have never heard, what about other faiths?' The Holy Spirit begins to challenge how you use the financial resources He's given you and you start arguing, 'well sure, but look at him over there Jesus, look what he's giving or not giving, I live more simply than him.' Or He challenges the way you treat your wife or your kids, and you go 'sure but listen to how he speaks to his wife.' And Jesus relentlessly turns the attention back to home: what about you?

So He says to the questioner and to the crowd: v24, "Strive to enter through the narrow door." Strive to make sure *you* are counted among the saved. Don't be casual about this; be serious; only a fool lingers without reason in a burning building. And when Jesus says 'strive' He uses the same word Paul uses for 'fight' – 'fight the good fight' (1 Tim 6:12). It's the word used for those who went into training to compete in the Olympic Games: so Jesus is saying, put as much effort into making sure you are among the saved as an athlete puts into pursuing gold; as much energy as a soldier does in fighting the battle.

Now, let's be clear that Jesus isn't saying you've got to work really hard to impress God and earn your way in. In the parable of the sower and the soils he's already told us salvation comes through hearing and believing the word of God (Luke 8:12); and at the beginning of chapter 13, He's told us we escape judgment through repentance (13:3,5). Rather, He's talking about an attitude of mind. Get serious about this. Move this from an intellectual discussion about others, to a matter of seriousness for your heart and soul. And the reason you need to do that is because other things are going to try and hinder you and stop you from taking this seriously and getting through that door. Things outside you and things inside you are going to stand in your way and you need to fight your way through.

So, when it comes to salvation, the question *Jesus* has is about you and none of us can afford to duck it.

The Door is Narrow

So in response Jesus says, v24, 'Strive to enter through the narrow door.'

So Jesus says there is a door. There is a way through from this world of sin and suffering into the Messiah's Kingdom. Like a child lost in the woods, who suddenly sees the clearing in the trees and the way out, there is a way back, a way home to our father. And God has opened that door. He has opened a portal, an entry, a way back from here to there.

But you've got to see that Jesus mentions only one door. Well meaning people will tell you that there are many doors, many ways out of the forest, and you just need to pick which ever one seems to work for you: try a few handles, ring a few bells. But right up Jesus says there's just the one that works. In John's gospel (14:6) he says 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.' Now, if that sounds exclusivist to you, that's because it is. So you're going to have to decide whose word to take on it. Do you trust all these others who say their door works just as well, or do you trust Jesus? And He says there's just one door and it's narrow.

Now, why's it narrow? What does He mean by that?

Well, Jesus tells this little parable of people turning up at the master's house, seeking to get entry to the banquet – it's a picture of the messianic feast at the end of the age, of the celebration there's going to be when God's kingdom comes in all its fullness on the last day. And there are people who want to get in but can't. They knock on the door, but the master won't let them in. v25: 'Lord, open to us,' then he will answer you, 'I do not know where you come from.' I'm sorry Jesus says, but you're a stranger to me.

But the people outside start saying, v26: 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.' What do you mean, you don't know us, Jesus? We're from your neighbourhood. I went to church every week, all my friends were Christians. I mean I know I was never *really* into it, but you've got to be careful about getting too obsessed, you of all people should know that Jesus, and at least I went once a week. Well, I especially went when there was a potluck lunch – I mean, we ate and drank together Jesus, don't you remember me?

And Jesus repeats, v27, 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from.' Church, I don't think there is any prospect more terrible than getting to the last day and being considered a stranger by Jesus.

And the door is narrow because an interest, even a keen interest in religion is not enough. Pursuing spirituality is not enough. Hearing Jesus' teaching is not enough. Fellowshiping and knowing and mixing with his people is not enough. In v26 Jesus calls the people who are shut out, 'workers of evil.' Now, if you met them in Jesus' time, you'd never have described them as workers of evil. Sure, there might be some who fitted that description, but others would be some of the most upright, moral, even religious people you'd met. Yet Jesus tells them (v26) 'depart from me, all you workers of evil,' because when it comes to sin, the greatest sin, of which we are all guilty, is to dethrone God as God, and establish ourselves in His place.

And the door is narrow because it's not familiarity with Jesus or His teaching that counts. What counts, what matters is being in real relationship with Him. It is being known by Him, and recognized by Him as His friend that is the only way to get entrance to the feast.

Now, when you hear that, if you have any sense of who Jesus is and who, in comparison you are, your reaction is likely to be one of, 'but I could never achieve that or deserve that. How could I ever hope to have Jesus declare me his friend.' You're right: none of us could hope to work to earn that. But out of His love and His grace, Jesus offers it to you. He invites you to come and enter as His guest. But entrance is reserved for those who will humbly receive, and respond to His free offer of friendship and forgiveness.

But it's a time-limited offer. Because not only is the door narrow, Jesus tells them it's also soon to be shut.

You see, the ultimate reason those who stood outside knocking were refused entry in Jesus' parable, is that the door had already been shut. They had left it too late. And Jesus, and the rest of the Bible writers are clear that we have this life, and this life only to respond to God's offer to come and enter His kingdom and join the party. As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says (9:27), 'it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.' And the tragedy of Jesus' parable is that many will discover just how wrong they were a few minutes after the door is closed.

In the UK, when it's time for a bar or a pub to wrap up for the night the landlord will call out 'time, gentlemen please.' And everyone has to drink up and go home. Well, the door of salvation is currently open, you can still drink at the bar, but one day He will call time, either on your life, or on this world, and none of us knows when either of those will be. And you and I can spend our time criticizing, and debating about the door, and how narrow it is, and isn't it unfair that it's going to close, and if I was God I'd do it differently and Jesus is saying, why don't you just pass through the door and come in while you can, because tomorrow may be too late.

And Jesus makes it clear that not everyone will take up His offer in time. In v34, when He laments over Jerusalem, He says, 'How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!' Literally Jesus says, "I willed, but you willed not. I wanted for you to come to me, and find refuge in me, but you didn't want to come.'

Over the Christmas holidays I read a story to the girls called Keeping Holiday. It's about two young cousins who go in search of a city called Holiday, and a bit like Pilgrim's Progress, it's an allegory of being found by Christ. And in one chapter Dylan and Clare get lost in an alleyway that gets darker and darker until they can see nothing and they despair of ever getting out. But just as they have given up all hope, they see a light in the distance, coming towards them. It's the Candlemaker, holding his candle aloft. The founder of the city has sent him to find them, and show them the way. But as they go with him the children ask him about all the others lost in the dark alley, whose voices they have heard crying out - why doesn't he go and get them too? In reply the Candlemaker says - I go out every day, calling them and inviting them to come, but they don't want to. They prefer to live in the darkness than come into the light.'

But that decision will be regretted Jesus says, because the alternative to coming into the kingdom, is to be shut out forever. And outside, Jesus says in v28, 'In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' It's a picture of something deeply unpleasant, of unremitting anger and bitterness.

So the door is narrow, and one day it will shut, and many will refuse to come. But, Jesus says, others are going to stream in to the kingdom from the four corners of the globe: v29, 'And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God.' And they will join the Patriarchs and the prophets and make up a multitude from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. And so whilst this door is narrow, it's also as wide as the nations. Gone is any sense of the gentiles being left outside, now God's

promise to Abraham that all nations on earth will be blessed through him will be fulfilled, and people will flood in from across the globe, Jesus says. And if you know anything about what is happening in China and Africa and Southern America today, you'll know they just keep coming. And in Jesus that old dividing wall between Jew and Gentile has been broken down and the door has been thrown wide open. And people in Israel who heard Jesus preach are going to miss it, while gentiles from some far flung corner of the globe will sit and eat with Abraham. Because it's not about your racial origin or your heritage, it's about how you respond to Jesus.

And there are going to be some surprises on the last day, Jesus says.

The Great Reversal

V30: "And behold." Jesus said, "some who are last will be first, and some are first who will be last."

So Jesus tells his listeners that when the time comes for the great celebration, and the great judgment at the end of the age, it's going to throw up some surprises. There are going to be some who thought they should be at the front of the queue and who thought the best seats at the dinner table have their names on them, who are not even going to get in; while people who they looked down on, who they would have sent to the very back of the queue are going to take their place.

Now, who is Jesus talking about? Who are the first who are going to come last and who are the last who will be first? Well, it's pretty clear that Jesus is talking about the Jewish leaders, both religious leaders like the Pharisees, and political leaders like Herod, and the everyday people of His day, who refused to accept Him. And they thought of themselves as the head of the queue: ethnically they were Jews, and they looked down on gentiles. Religiously they considered themselves righteous and despised the likes of prostitutes and tax collectors. But Jesus issues this chilling warning. Those you think of as unworthy are going to come from all over and sit at the banquet table, while you are locked outside. There is going to be this great reversal.

But what has that got to do with us? Two things. Firstly, it should teach us profound humility. You see, by the world's standards we are the first. By any human, worldly assessment, we are at the front of the queue. We are educated, prosperous and to some extent powerful. And for the most part our lives are together and externally righteous. And that means there is this continual temptation to look down on those for whom that isn't true and to live in a bubble, while others starve for want of food and education. And Jesus says, the first shall be last.

But secondly, when you become aware of what you are really like on the inside, and how undeserving you really are and that by an estimation you should be at the back of the queue, and that it's only by His grace and His mercy and His free forgiveness that He has made you His friend and has invited you to come, then you wonder how can He treat you like this? How come I who by heaven's

standards should be last, how come I am ushered to the front? I understand why the first end up last, but how can the last become first?

And the answer is that Jesus went through the great reversal for you. When Herod and the Pharisees try and scare Him off, Jesus makes it plain that nothing will stop Him from going to Jerusalem and finishing His course. He is going to Jerusalem to die. He who was first, by all heavenly standards, became last for you. At the cross, He took the way down so that you might find the way up. And that is why the door of salvation is narrow – because it is only through Jesus and His humbling himself and becoming last for us that we can come in. But it is also why the door of salvation is open, because He has thrown it open that as many as receive Him might come in.

Now in closing I want to make one last point. When it comes to the exclusivity of Jesus, and the narrowness of the door, and the realities of hell, you are going to meet people who profoundly and emotionally disagree with you and with what Jesus so plainly teaches. How should you handle those situations? Well, unsurprisingly Jesus has something to teach us here.

When Others Differ

Firstly, be clear about the truth. Jesus never flinched from the truth. He was prepared to call a spade a spade, or in this case a fox a fox. The theologians can't agree on whether Jesus calling Herod a fox was Him saying Herod was devious and crooked, or whether He was calling Herod an insignificant nobody. Whatever Jesus meant by fox, He didn't mean pussy-cat. Jesus was prepared to say it as it is and sometimes that will ruffle some feathers. So don't flinch from the truth.

But secondly, when Jesus laments over Jerusalem, you can feel the heart-breaking compassion He has even for His enemies. v34, 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!' There's no sense of self-righteous, vindictive anger there, but the pity and compassion of God towards a people who refuse to listen. And when you have experienced and felt that same love and compassion from God toward you, and when you know in your heart that He loved you when you were still His enemy, and yet you have found refuge under the shadow of His wing, then you will find the grace and compassion to extend to those who oppose you.

And thirdly, and finally, you can respond with grace and love to those who differ when it sinks in that God is in control. The reason Jesus had no fear of Herod or of what would happen to Him in Jerusalem was that He knew God was in sovereign control over it all. And when you encounter opposition for the message of Jesus, you don't need to get frustrated with anger, instead you can know the peace of resting secure in the knowledge that He is working everything out according to His perfect plan.