

'I am the good shepherd
who goes through the gate.

In fact I am the gate.'

An odd thing, to say the very least
for Jesus to spout out.

Here in John's Gospel

Jesus is more like T S Eliot,
2000 years before his time,
bombarding us

with compressed image after compressed image.

'Six hands at an empty door dicing for pieces of silver,
and feet kicking the empty wineskins.'

Who hasn't puzzled over those lines

in Eliot's Journey of the Magi

when read out at our cosy carol services?

They were written to puzzle us,
to disturb our Christmas complacency.

'I am the good shepherd
who goes through the gate.

In fact I am the gate.'

Puzzling words to disturb our Easter complacency.

Yet in a funny way
gates have loomed large for me this past week,
terribly large.

Early last Sunday morning I went out for a cycle ride.

I often do that to psyche myself up for the day ahead,
a bracing ride to the top of Duncombe Park.

I was in a bit of a rush,

so I cycled up to the park gates at great speed,

well 19.78 miles per hour actually,

only to find the gates were shut.

I slammed my ineffective brakes on,

closed my eyes and anticipated a collision,

but marvellously

the gates

silently and suddenly

opened to admit me.

Spooky!

And I hadn't even had time

to fire my sonic screwdriver at them!

Jesus said

'I am the good shepherd

who goes through the gate.

In fact I am the gate.'

Thinking of Jesus in a gatey way

and thinking of gates in a Jesusy way,

what had my very peculiar experience to tell me?

Well closed gates often put us off,

'Oh we better not go through into the Park,

the gates are shut,

Lord Feversham may be sleeping.'

And even if they don't put us off,

they slow us down,

we have to get off the bike,

lose our momentum,

climb over them,

go round.

I didn't.

I went straight at them

and they opened unto me.

Don't be shy,

don't be nervous,
don't be half-hearted,
don't avoid Christ the gate,
go straight at him
with your full life's force,
and he will open heaven itself up for you.
Even if heaven after Duncombe Park
is a bit of a come down.

Go full-on at Christ.
I really believe that.
I'm fed up of the prevalent attitude
that you can only take Christ in small doses,
when we need to go for him
lock, stock and barrel,
this man who offers resurrected life

in all its fullness to us.
How could we go for less than total collision with him?
The Upper Ryedale benefice
has one service in each of its churches
every fifth Sunday: 1:5
Small doses like that are not so much collision with Christ
as inoculation against.

My second gatey experience
was last Tuesday
when I took the photographer from
the Malton Gazette and Herald,
that famous work of fiction,
up to the top of All Saints tower
to publicise our Ascension day jape.
The way to the top of All Saints tower

is not an easy one.

The stone spiral staircase is bad enough:

which of us isn't gasping for breath

by the time we reach the Belfry?

But then the fun really begins,

as you climb long ladders

and stand on platforms suspended by magic

and crawl along beams

and wobble on planks.

It's so brave of the Music Group to want to go up on 1 May!

I won't be doing a health and safety check

because it certainly isn't healthy and definitely not safe!

Nor is the Gospel –

'Unless you take up your cross and follow me

you cannot be my disciple!'

Health and Safety does not ride easily with crucifixion.

And then at the end of all that climbing up the tower

the first one up

has to push with all his might

the leaded trapdoor,

the gate which gives access to the top.

The top with simply glorious views,

which sets all Helmsley's disparate parts

in one harmonious patchwork.

Getting through that gate

is a real challenge, a real struggle,

but so, so worth it.

A view to take your breath away,

if you had any breath to take away,

a view which integrates,

which brings wholeness and makes sense of it all.

'I am the good shepherd
who goes through the gate.
In fact I am the gate.'
Getting through that gate is hard,
a struggle,
you might have to slim down to fit through.
But so, so worth it.
Faith can be a struggle,
a reckless climb
that seems like madness,
that makes every sinew of your body ache,
and then the end, the final assault,
even more demanding than the wretched journey.
Our Lord mapped the journey for us,
paved the way,
assured us that we could follow,

encouraging us with his very life to do so.
But he never said it would be easy.
And I would be suspicious if it were:
easy is the path that leads to destruction.

My final gate
is the Athole gates
(how tempted that engraver must have been!)
between the churchyard and the Black Swan.
The stone pillar holding one of the gates
was in a bad way.
The penultimate stone was eroded,
wobbling dangerously,
threatening to throw itself
and the stone cap above it down to the ground.
'Something ought to be done about that

it could injure a child if it toppled,'

several people told me,

as if I hadn't noticed.

The trouble is that repair to church fabric

can take an age,

permission from committees,

legal faculties to be applied for,

estimates to be sought.

And then you need to tie a builder down to do the deed.

I agree with our Archbishop

who quipped that

the Church of England has the engine of a lawnmower

and the brakes of a juggernaut!

In despair I emailed Guy Brudenell,

the driving force behind all the hotel developments

going on so popularly around us,

and explained the situation to him.

Next day his foreman was at my door,

and the next day

three Polish stonemasons

had beautifully restored the pillar

with new stone,

so that it was infinitely better

than the botched job done decades ago

which caused us all the trouble.

'I am the good shepherd

who goes through the gate.

In fact I am the gate.'

A gate repaired.

Who repairs Christ,

wounded and buffeted and spurned by the world?

Usually the people who repair him
are not the obvious priests and Levites
whose very life's work should be to repair him.
Instead you are surprised by Good Samaritans.
On the first Good Friday
you get some surprising people repairing our Lord.
Simon of Cyrene who carries his cross:
in films and legend Simon is usually portrayed as a black man,
an outcast.
The Veronicas,
named and un-named,
who wipe our Lord's face
of actual blood and sweat and tears.
The Josephs,
who offer their tomb
so our Lord's mangled body is treated with dignity,

paving the way for resurrection.
All repairers of Christ, the gate.
Surprising repairers.

When I stood at the lych-**gate**
receiving your Gift Day envelopes
on the rainiest of days last September,
a lovely young American girl
came along with a cup of hot chocolate.
'I don't have any truck with religion,
but I was so sorry to see you standing there all day
in this terrible weather,
so I've brought you this to warm you up.'
People are so generous on Gift Day.
But her gift was in another league.
Repairing the gate: repairing Christ.

'I am the good shepherd

who goes through the gate.

In fact I am the gate.'

Going at Christ the gate full on.

Admitting that getting through Christ the gate

may be a struggle of Olympic proportions.

Being surprised by those who repair the Christ the gate.

But don't take my word for it.

This week look at the gates you encounter,

the gates you take for granted

and see what they say to you about the Lord of your life.