

The Narrow Door.

Our parable today is a bit of a hybrid, it's not quite a parable and it's not just a simple illustration. It's kind of halfway between the parable of the five wise, five foolish handmaidens and the illustration in Matthew of the broad gate and the narrow gate.

I'm sure you will remember the parable of the 10 handmaidens. They have oil lamps ready to greet the bridegroom, but he's late in coming. When he does arrive, the five wise girls are prepared and have oil for their lamps and so they go into the banquet. The five foolish girls are shut out. The whole point of that story is not being prepared and being shut out. No amount of pleading gets them in.

The illustration in Matthew is this one...

Enter through the **narrow gate**. For wide is the **gate** and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the **gate** and **narrow** the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

To put the parable and the illustration in context remember that Jesus is in Israel and for most of the time is speaking to Jews.

The Jews expected they would inherit a place in God's kingdom. It was their birth right as descendants of Abraham. On many occasions Jesus tells stories about being shut out, or others getting in ahead, or missing eternal life.

The frequency with which Jesus said these things leads an individual to ask the question from today's scripture.

*Lord. Are only a few people going to be saved?*

Sometimes, a single question can have a far greater weight to it than usual.

Our son Iain once asked me something that was that kind of question. Iain was trying out the phrases and sentences he heard us using, and seeing me struggle to open a packet of biscuits he said

*Dad, what are you doing on earth?*

I presume he meant *Dad, what on earth are you doing*, rather than some existential question, but it struck a chord with me, even though he didn't mean it the way I took it. It was at a very critical time for me in considering my future and my calling to a vocation in ministry.

What am I doing? What does God require of me?

Luke uses the question as a summary for a lot of Jesus teaching.

*Lord. Are only a few people going to be saved?*

In the first part, Jesus says "make every effort to enter through the narrow door". Entry will require discipline, effort, struggle even. It's not through having an automatic pass. They don't exist.

On holiday recently the cottage we stayed for our first week had two narrow doors for entry. One side opened on the yale catch and if you wanted to open the other you had to unbolt it. That wasn't really necessary, but you had to turn sideways to get through the half door. I couldn't go in or out wearing my rucksack. It was hard to go in that way if you were carrying Sam our grandson. A tight fit, awkward.

So as illustrations go it's one we can all recognise. And Jesus says that many will not get through this door. Then he goes on.

The Narrow Door.

The owner gets up and closes the door. People stand outside pleading and knocking wanting to come in. In this parable, who is the owner of the house?

On this occasion it's Jesus himself.

People want entry claiming that "We ate and drank with you, you taught in our streets" and he will reply, "I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me all you evil-doers."

Through-out his teaching Jesus repeatedly gives warnings about missing out, being shut out, heading for destruction, missing out on God's kingdom.

It's very, very tempting to emphasize that he's mostly talking to his own people the Jews particularly as there is comforting news for Gentiles later on in the passage.

People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God.

Ok – we could leave it there. It's a warning to the Jews and good news for us. Those who respond to Jesus will gain his kingdom.

To leave it at that would be superficial to say the least.

The narrow door is a narrow door for everyone.

Who will enter through it? Those who have accepted Jesus. Those who do the will of the Father. It's not just faith, it's living the faith and living it with the right motivation.

In Matthew 7:21ff we read "Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. Many will say to me on that day

Lord, Lord did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles. Then I will tell them plainly, I never knew you. Away from me you evil doers.

There's no room for complacency. The narrow door (or gate) and the narrow road to life is one that requires discipline and effort and humility and sincerity. Faith in Christ is matched by carrying out the Father's will.

But this passage (and many like it) leave us with some big questions if you are willing to explore them. The broad road heading for destruction. How do we feel about all those souls? How do we feel about all those shut out?

The idea of Universalism is almost as old as Christianity itself. Universalism is the conviction that in the fulness of time all souls will be released from the penalties of sin and restored to God. Supporters like Clement of Alexandria believed all would be saved, opponents like Augustine of Hippo declared the idea heretical.

It has endured and changed over the centuries and in various forms it's been expressed. It is very attractive, after all who wants anyone to be sent to eternal torment in Hell?

But the theology of universalism doesn't fit with scripture or the words of Jesus, however attractive it might be.

I think this leaves us with something to enquire into further. All those people who have never heard of Jesus Christ what is the outcome for them? All those who have been misguided what about them? All those the church has hurt and excluded, all those who lived in cultures and places where they couldn't respond to Jesus as they never heard of him? What of them?

The Narrow Door.

The author Rob Bell says this.

*Of all the billions of people who ever lived, will only a select number make it to a better place and every other person suffer in torment and punishment forever? Is this acceptable to God? Has God created millions of people over tens of thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish? Can God do this or even allow this and claim to be a loving God? (Rob Bell – Love Wins 2011)*

Jesus words and warnings lead us to take seriously the narrow door, but we must also consider those who don't even know a door exists.

I'm going to be preaching again in a fortnight so I shall take this topic further then, drawing on a book by Roger Harper called "the lie of Hell". It suggests the church has taken the heaven or hell alternative and used the threat of hell to scare people into faith. That doesn't fit comfortably with a loving God. Roger Harper examines closely what Jesus says and how the church has not had an accurate view of hell. So - watch this space.

Why bother with this topic??

Because one aspect of faith that leaves people unwilling to engage is the almost cartoon like spectacle of a few happy souls in heaven and millions toasting somewhere hot. We shall see if that squares with what Jesus says.

We shall examine the words of Jesus and puzzle through these deep questions to an understanding of God's purpose and plans.

To conclude this week though an encouragement.

Jesus is speaking to people who may miss his kingdom through complacency. But at other times the generosity of God and the grace and mercy of God is just overwhelming. Jesus pointed to the tax-collectors, prostitutes and sinners and said that they were entering the kingdom ahead of those who thought they had a ticket.

Jesus says that people will come from east and west and north and south into his kingdom, and some of those I am convinced have been living the will of God with no overt knowledge of Christ. Ultimately, the kingdom is God's Kingdom and his love and grace reach the heavens. He will do what is loving, just and right.

Let us pray.