

18 MAY 2025 EASTER 5 A REFLECTION Rev Wayne Toleafoa

THE NARROW GATE

Readings: Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

Like many ministers who use the Revised Common Lectionary, I read the Bible readings for Sunday early on in the week. I let the passages sink in over the week. Dive into some commentaries and of course pray for understanding. I also pray for you, that the Holy Spirit will lead us to God.

As I ruminated over today's readings, I kept thinking about that phrase that Jesus used: 'The Narrow Gate' or 'The Narrow Door'.

Today I'd like to invite you to think about 'The narrow gate' or the 'narrow door', mentioned in Luke 13:22-30.

It's not one of our readings for today, but it has a great relevance to our readings which I hope to show as we explore our readings for today.

²²Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. ²³Someone asked him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" He said to them, ²⁴"Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. ²⁵Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.' "But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.'

The church I grew up in was what we might describe as a 'middle-of-road' church theologically. There were no extremes. I can't remember ever hearing a 'fire and brimstone' sermon. Nor did I hear any esoteric sermons about the end times.

We were definitely not a 'closed' church where behaviour was closely monitored and lines drawn between true believers and others. Although you were expected to become a member to receive communion.

There was none of what I call, 'heavy shepherding' where the elders and ministers exercised control over others – and almost lived in the pockets of their parishioners.

Most of our personal and political decisions were left to conscience, rather than prescribed by the minister and elders.

I was shocked to find that one of my close school friends attended a church that was all of the opposite of things I've mentioned: My friend's church was judgemental. Hell was frequently mentioned. The behaviour of the congregation was closely monitored. There was heavy shepherding by elders and pastor. And they even chose who you could date

and who you could marry. And they believed the end of the world would happen in our lifetimes.

It was a bit like a Gloriavale, except 'hidden in plain sight', as they say. During the week, people went about their normal careers/work – but there was always an invisible accountability to the church leadership and to the vision of the church.

One Sunday I decided to go along to that church with my friend, to see what it was like.

I wish I had never gone. It was claustrophobic. It was like being watched by a sect full of smiling deluded assassins. One member even suggested to me that God had called me to be a member of that church, and that if I left, I would be disobeying God.

It was like Gloriavale in plain sight. Gloriavale in the suburbs.

When I look back, I thank God that my faith was strong enough to resist the guilt which the cult-like church thrived on. Especially at an impressionable age. I think I was fourteen. I thank God that I came from an accepting, loving congregation and a loving family who satisfied my need to belong.

The 'narrow gate', or the 'narrow door' for my friend's church, meant obeying a set of rules and obeying the pastor.

There are lots of churches in NZ and elsewhere who still believe that the narrow gate means following a series of Biblical rules.

In the long history of the Christian Church there have been various interpretations of the 'narrow' door.

The monastic orders are a good example. Men and women who lived a cloistered life were considered to be closer to heaven/paradise than say a lay person doing their best to live a good life.

Going into the priesthood/ministry was another narrow 'door' which was considered one step above being an ordinary Christian.

And even after the Reformation – the learned clergy made up an elite favoured class of Christian.

The lives of the cloistered and the ordained were marked by discipline, self-denial, rejection of the 'world' and all its temptations.

In our gospel lesson today, Jesus is in the Upper Room with his disciples. It is on what we now call 'Maundy Thursday' - the Thursday night when Jesus gathered his disciples in the Upper Room and when he did 3 notable things: 1. He washed the feet of the disciples, 2. He instituted the Last Supper, 3. He uttered the new commandment which ended with the words: 'As I have loved you'.

'As I have loved you'. By this will all men know that you are my disciples.

Scholars like Richard Rohr suggest that this phrase, 'as I have loved you' is the key to understanding the meaning of 'the narrow door'.

'Loving, 'as Jesus loved' is the narrow door.

Going over and above the command to love God and neighbour, is the narrow door.

You will remember how Jesus said in Luke 6:32-36

³² 'If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.'

We know that it's quite easy to love God and to love those who love us. Even the Mongrel Mob love one another – but its another thing to love 'as Jesus loved'. To love beyond our circle of loved ones and friends.

On that first Maundy Thursday, in the Upper Room, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples – bidding them to do likewise.

He then shared the Last Supper. And you may remember that during the Supper he mentioned that one of the disciples would betray him. Judas slipped out of the room, to go and meet the temple priests and guards who would arrest Jesus later that night.

Jesus also told Peter that he would deny that he knew Jesus three times before the rooster crowed at dawn.

Despite the fact that he was about to be betrayed and about to be denied by two of his trusted disciples – Jesus continued to love them.

On the cross Jesus said, 'Father forgive them for they don't know what they are doing'.

He was forgiving Judas. He was forgiving Peter for denying him. He was forgiving the temple priests and the soldiers involved in his condemnation, his torture and execution.

That is the Christ-love, or divine love, that went above and beyond and beyond the two greatest commandments, and above and beyond the easy love where we love those who love us.

'As I have loved you...' takes the commandments to another level.

A level that many of us will find hard to achieve.

That is the narrow door, or the narrow gate.

In our reading from Acts 11:1-18 written by Luke, as 'Part Two' of Lukes Gospel (inspired by Peter) we see the post-Pentecost Church.

Gentiles, like the Roman Centurion Cornelius, are now being added to the largely Jewish Christian Church. We are seeing a church in transition. A church being transformed by the Holy Spirit to include an ever-widening circle of people including Romans, Greeks and other Gentile races. The Christian Church is no longer a Jewish Church or a sect within Judaism. It has become a universal church.

In the Book of Acts, we are seeing the powerful and gracious love of Christ coming through his followers.

Peter, and the staunch Christian Jews are starting to abandon the rules about mixing with Gentiles like Cornelius and others.

They are beginning to emulate the 'Greater Love' that Jesus displayed in his ministry. A ministry to outcasts and sinners and to those considered to be unclean.

The sad news about the Christian Church is that we (Christians) have not always been good to one another – or good towards our Jewish and Muslim neighbours.

We have not loved one another as Christ has loved us.

During my time in Oxford, I came across a memorial on a busy main street marking the spot where three bishops were burnt to death during the reign of Henry VIII. The history of the church is peppered with executions. We are like the only army that shoots its own members.

We have not been good to Christians who disagree with us.

'By this shall all men know that you are my disciples. If you have love for one another'. This was to be how Jesus' glory would be displayed.

Instead, we in the Church of Christ have sought revenge when someone has betrayed us, or when they have spoken ill of us, we have sought to destroy them.

We have to admit that we are failures when it comes to loving people 'as Christ loves them'. We are failures when it comes to going through the narrow gate.

Finally, our reading from Revelation 21 presents a surrealistic and (some might say, bizarre) picture of the End Time. In keeping with apocalyptic literature, symbols and signs are used to express the inexpressible.

But contrary to the horrible End Time visions offered by some cults and churches it is also a very happy ending.

It is not a catastrophe where the Earth is destroyed. It is the picture of a new creation – a new Heaven wedded to Earth like a bride. The divine has become one with the material mundane world that we know. God is everywhere present.

‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.’

Comforting words that certainly don’t describe a catastrophe. Heaven has come down to Earth and has become the new home where God is everywhere.

PRAYER

Almighty and Everlasting God
Through your Son Jesus Christ
Heaven has come down to Earth.
In Christ we have met You.
Give us the strength and love
To enter the narrow gate which leads to everlasting life
In this life and in the life to come.
Help us to love one another as You have loved us
So that all may know that we are your disciples.
Make us part of your new creation
That we may live forever in your presence
In the new heaven and new earth.
Through Christ our Risen Saviour. **Amen.**