

even if it did they couldn't walk the walk. Both of these are false understandings because the gate is not opened by their hand and the way is not walked by their strength alone. How to illustrate this? Simon Peter came to mind. Simon was one of Jesus first disciples, and Jesus gave him a new name, Peter, which means rock. The faith he showed being the rock on which the church is built, but when it came to the night Jesus was betrayed to be crucified the house of Peter's faith turned out to be built on sand. A storm of fear overthrew his house of faith. On the very night he swore to Jesus that, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will" he denied Jesus three times, even to calling down curses on himself and swearing, "I don't know the man!"

Peter was with Jesus in the narrow way, but with these words he exits into the broad way. Forgetting that he who wants to save his life will lose it. But Jesus rises from the dead, and after Easter He stands on the seashore, when Peter and others have gone out to fish. They catch nothing. Jesus tells them to throw their nets on the other side and suddenly they are full. John realises it is Jesus. Peter dives into the water to swim to the shore. He wants to re-enter the narrow gate and walk once more in the narrow way. But he can't do so by his own power. The door is locked by his betrayal, by his sin. The way through the narrow gate is by forgiveness of our wrongs. Jesus insists on that. There is no sin in heaven and Jesus will not give it permission to enter there. As Peter himself will say later: turn to God, be baptised for the forgiveness of your sins.

Jesus does not call Peter by that name, but only by his birth name Simon, son of John and so shows Peter's separation from Himself. He asks Peter three times, Simon, son of John, do you love me. John tells us that Peter was hurt by this repeated question, but Christ's questions and his love response are the process of his forgiveness, wiping out his earlier denials.

This tells us two things. The first is that repentance, turning to God, admitting that your life has hurt others, hurt yourself and even hurt God is essential. The key of confession fits the lock of forgiveness.

No matter how awful our wrongs, how deep our shame, how hurting our failures, our sin is never final with God. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. By forgiveness God releases the bolt that holds the gate closed, swinging it open for us to enter the way. And then we walk in the fellowship presence of the Holy Spirit, whose power is the guiding and the keeping of our walk in the way of Christ, the eternal glory of the Father. Amen.



Sunday 14th February 2021
Reflecting on Matthew 7:13-14
Valentine Love
The narrow way and gate

What is the love that we celebrate on Valentine's Day?

Did you get a Valentine of some sort, did you give one? Perhaps you didn't yet in most years in UK, nearly half the population spend money on their Valentines spending altogether well over £1000 million on cards, flowers, chocolates, and other gifts, with some 25 million cards being sent. No wonder shops in normal years have a commercial love for Valentines.

But what is the love that Valentines express? Valentines developed in the middle ages, they arose within the idea of courtly love. In the way that Hollywood and TV pop songs now model love to us, so did the poets and singers of the time. The media may have changed but the celebrity shaping of social ideas remains. And the big idea then was 'courtly love'. This according to C S Lewis had four main characteristics. The first two were humility and courtesy. The qualities of the perfect gentle knight. Christian qualities. But I'm not sure how big these still are today.

The third quality was a religion of love. Now this is still alive and flourishing. God is love, the bible tells us, but we have inverted that to say, love is God. Love has become a right of life. As Patrick Michael in his writing on Christian love [BST The Message of Love] puts it, we long for love as a source of sanity and happiness, and prize it so much that nothing has the right to stand in its way. It's a view of love, sourced in the Christian understanding of love, which has led us a long way from the Christian truth and practices of love.

The BBC seems to be endlessly recycling Dad's Army. We all laugh when the German submarine captain asks 'What's your name?'" And Mainwaring shouts out 'Don't tell him, Pike'. But did you know that Mum's Army, when Mainwaring was recruiting women into the company, is one of its most remembered episodes, when all its watching millions see Mainwaring fall in love with a woman called Mrs. Gray. And many are sad when fidelity overcomes romance and they part at the train station in their own *Brief Encounter* moment. The fourth characteristic of Valentine courtly love, according to Lewis, was adultery. I wonder how many cards and gifts are sent between married couples and how many are sent from a married person to someone not their spouse?

What is true Valentine's love? Valentine was a Christian pastor, maybe even a bishop, who cared for his people in 3rd Century Rome in days of persecution. And for that love of Christ and His people, Valentine was martyred. His body was buried at a Christian cemetery on the Via Flaminia close to the Ponte Milvio to the north of Rome, on February 14 in the year of our Lord AD 269. It was that date which the papacy later recognised as a feast day, a festival date. We have no idea if Valentine ever gave romantic roses to a woman, but we do know he gave his life for Jesus.

The narrow gate and way [1]

The sermon on the mount was addressed to Jesus' disciples, but there was also a crowd listening. I wonder what the crowd made of these words, for it's the crowd that is thronging the broad road. The gate is Jesus Christ, as He tells us in John 10:9 'I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved'. The narrow gate is Christ Jesus and the narrow way is the way of Jesus Christ. Before His disciples were called Christians they were called, the people of the Way and Christianity was called the Way of the Lord. See the Book of Acts, for example in c9 v1 and 2 where Saul, in his persecution years asked the Jews High priest for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

The narrow gate and the narrow way are contrasted with the wide gate and the broad road. We enter the wide gate and broad road simply by being born. There is not a third position; no third gate to a third largish way, less broad and less narrow, where we can enjoy aspects of the broad road without becoming some sort of Jesus 'freak' and still avoid destruction and come to life.

Of course it is the perennial wish of our society that there should be a third way, the way we choose, saying sincerity is all. And as God is love and God forgives surely the God of love will bring me to life, if I live now in sincere commitment to what I think is good and true and right, but never say Yes to Jesus. Which is like wanting to win the lottery without buying a ticket. And it sets aside all those people who are so sincerely committed to what they think is good, true and right that they bomb pubs, and hotels, and churches, kidnap girls from schools, and persecute whole swathes of other people. Jesus doesn't say sincerity is all you need, neither does He say all you need is love. But He does say, I am all you need.

With Him there is life, And without Him there is destruction. He does not define what He means by destruction but it is a terrible word, as John Stott says in his commentary, for we are made for life not death. God's purpose is to bring people home to Himself. We are made for life with Him. Sadly, although Jesus shows us God's love we cut ourselves off from knowing Him. That means we cut ourselves

from God's future for us at Home with Him in the new creation where God will wipe every tear from our eyes, where there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away. That is the life the Way of Jesus leads to. It begins as we enter the narrow gate, it is the Way we head as we walk with Him; narrow for we walk within His boundaries of what we can do.

That is the destiny of the Way of Christ. The broad road way does not lead there, nor does it lead to an alternative Paradise, but to a future where, at the very least, everything good and true and right will cease to be - where there is no love, no peace, no joy, no hope. A future, John Stott observes, too awful to contemplate without tears. For the broad road is suicide road.

I know that the very fact of such a future is anathema to our hearts, we want to believe that somehow it will be alright after our death. But Jesus doesn't say that and so I can't say that. I can't say however you live, all will be well. Have a good time as you wish and a good time future will be yours. To say such a thing would be to take on the sheep's clothing of false a prophet, setting aside the Word people do not want to hear, for words they love to hear.

It would betray the millions of Christians around the world from Kenya to North Korea who are suffering a plague of persecutions. It would betray Valentine, rejecting his pastoral love for the passing love of pleasing. It would betray Jesus, for it would deny Him. And it would betray you and all whom it encourages to avoid the narrow gate, and the narrow way.

However hard it is Jesus words are an invite to come to Him and live with Him and come to eternal life, for the broad way that now seems easy is a doom that your life cannot bear.

Reflection: The narrow gate and way [2]

The truth of the narrow gate and the narrow way is call to Christians to live in Christ's way. The sermon on the mount of which these words are a part of is conclusion is not a good ideas talk, but a call to practical action. This is the huge topic of how to live the Christian life. Part of that includes seeking to bring others to the narrow gate, and showing by the fruits of our lives that the narrow way is a way of blessing, and goodness, even as it is by virtue of being narrow a way of suffering. But as pruned trees grow a greater and more delicious crop so also our suffering generates a more attractive fruit.

However as I was struggling with what to say here, it came to me by slow emergence that one of the main blockages in peoples' hearts against going through the narrow gate is that they don't believe it will open for them. And that