

'Alice' Sermon at Sandford Parish Church
Pentecost Sunday, 11th May 2008

The Open Door

Near the beginning of Lewis Carroll's story *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice has the adventure of the door into the garden. She's just fallen down the rabbit hole, following a talking white rabbit (always a hazardous thing to do) and she finds herself in a low, long hallway.

Behind a curtain on the wall she discovers a little door, just over a foot high. There's a tiny golden key lying on a glass table nearby, and she opens the door with it, but she's far too big to get in. She kneels down, and sees through the doorway a glimpse of a beautiful rose-garden. Lewis Carroll writes:

She knelt down and looked along the passage into the loveliest garden you ever saw. How she longed to get out of that dark hall, and wander among those beds of bright flowers and those cool fountains, but she could not even get her head through the doorway, 'and even if my head would go through', thought poor Alice, it would be of very little use without my shoulders.

Alice desperately wants to get into this wonderful place, and sees a bottle with the words 'drink me' on the label. Pausing a moment to make sure that there's not another label with the word 'poison' on it (she's a sensible child), she drinks, and shrinks. She dwindles to just the right size – about 10 inches, but the door's slammed shut, and she's *left the key on the table*. Of course, she can't reach it.

Fortunately her eyes now fall on a small cake lying under the table, with the words 'eat me' written on it in currants. She eats and grows tall, so tall that she thinks she'll have to start sending letters to her feet. She picks up the key from the table and hurries over to the door, but now she's *far too big* to get through it.

Lying down, she can only just see into the garden with one eye.

After a vigorous bout of crying which creates a huge pool of water, she picks up a fan which has been dropped by the white rabbit, and as she fans herself she begins to grow small again. Dropping the fan just before she vanishes altogether, she is now small enough to get through the door. But alas for Alice! The door is shut again and she's left the little golden key once more on the table.

She falls into the pool of her own tears.

It isn't hard to follow Lewis Carroll's thought here. There always seems to be a door we want to get through, to reach a rose-garden beyond, but the conditions never seem to be right. We're too small or too big, too young or too old.

The door into the rose garden stands for what we desire: we often want to be somewhere else or somebody else, anything but ourselves in the present moment.

When we are young we long for the time when we will be older and have a position of responsibility and influence. In the mid-time of life we look back to the carefree days of youth, or we look forward to the time when we will have succeeded enough to retire comfortably and rid ourselves of the burden of responsibility. And when we are elderly we long for the time when we worked and were wanted and valued, or we look back to when the children were in the house and wish they were still there with their noise and demands.

It never seems to be possible to get through the door. We're not in the right place, or it's not the right time, or we don't know the right people. We want desperately to get to the place that we think will meet all our desires: to be in a certain circle of friends, or to belong to a particular society, or to have achieved a certain status.

I notice that with students Oxford seems full of doors like this. At first it seems enough to get through the entrance door; but then there are further doors beyond into the inner circles from which they fear they are excluded.

It's said that Lewis Carroll, or Charles Dodgson, Fellow of Christ Church wrote this story sitting in his dark room in college, waiting for the next obtuse undergraduate to arrive for a tutorial in mathematics. From his window he looked out on the Deanery Garden, full of grass and flowers where the Dean's children were playing. He'd rather be there, but was held by his responsibilities. Allowed one day to go into the garden to photograph the college from that angle, he had met Alice for the first time, the daughter of Dean Liddell, and for her he wrote the book.

If only, we think, we could go through *that* door, or *that* one. And our pleasure in where we are is quite spoilt. Or we're full of regret for the door we once failed to open when we had the chance, consumed by grief for a lost opportunity. This is how TS Eliot uses the image in his poem 'Burnt Norton', first of the *Four Quartets*, admitting that he was thinking of this passage in *Alice*. He writes:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What *might have been* is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility

Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
*Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden.* My words echo
Thus, in your mind.
 But to what purpose
Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves
I do not know.

Eliot's point is that the lost opportunity *is* lost, past. It can't be kept alive in a world of speculation. It's gone, let it go. There is still a present moment in which to grasp love and beauty.

But it is hard for us to say yes to life here and now. What is often easier is the mood of resignation, or the longing for a door which is not the one actually facing us. How shall we learn to say yes to where we are? How shall we open ourselves to the Spirit of Pentecost, full of promise?

The Old Testament Psalm that we read together also pictures people approaching a door, and being full of expectation about what lies behind it. Psalm 24 is a 'psalm of ascent', a song to be sung as worshippers climb the mount on which the Temple of God is built, as they walk up to the great door of entrance.
It's not a tiny door, but one which seems to dwarf *them* into insignificance.

They are expecting to find something beyond the door which will make a difference to them, perhaps change their life for ever. They express this by saying that they are 'seeking the face of God'. They want to catch a glimpse of that holy and personal reality which lies behind the earth and the seas. So they sing:

The earth is the Lord's and the fulness of it...
For he has founded it upon the seas
and established upon the rivers.

But here's the key thing. They're full of confident expectation because they're not entering the Temple on their own. The God whom they expect to find in the holy place is in fact *already with them*. They sing:

Lift up your heads, O gates!
And be lifted up, O ancient doors!....
That the King of Glory may come in.

The mighty God of all creation is *with* them, calling for admission. God is calling upon the pillars of these doors to bend and stretch, to let the King of Glory in.

You see, they have a sign of God's presence with them as they climb the hill to the gates of the Temple: they are carrying the ark of the covenant. This precious object wasn't a box in which they thought God lived, but it *was* a special place of meeting with God, a place appointed. So the people singing this ancient song certainly expect to find God *behind* the doors; they expect to stand in his presence there. There they expect to find the secret at the heart of existence that makes sense of everything. But they also know that God is *with* them as they climb the hill and make their entry.

As we enter the church doors each Sunday, we come carrying the ark of God's presence. 'The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it'. We each come with our experiences of life - some difficult and full of tears, others full of joy and laughter. In the midst of these we have touched the ark of the presence: we have known a faithful *love* that is greater than any of us, and we have known a *demand* on *our* sense of justice that is more challenging than anything else.

If we are to find what really matters, and what will change us, *beyond* the doors, we must learn to listen to each other, and discover *how* we have been living all the time in the presence of the one who creates heaven and earth. Then we can begin to say yes to life here and now.

But let's return for a moment to Alice and *her* garden. She finally gets in by eating a magic mushroom (nothing new there), and she does find it to be a wonderful place with exciting adventures. But Lewis Carroll is nothing if not realistic: there's also something nasty in the garden.

There's the Queen of Hearts, who seems to be a spirit of sheer violence, always shouting 'off with his head', 'off with her head'. Some critics are worried about the effect this might have on children, but on the whole they seem unfazed by it, unlike the adults. The Queen isn't just violent for the sake of it - she wants to protect her territory. Her violence is the force that tries to exclude, to shut the door on those who don't fit in - in her view.

She orders three gardeners to be beheaded, but Alice hides them in a large flower-pot. "Are their heads off?" shouts the queen. "Their heads are *gone*" the soldiers wisely reply. That's enough. She wants people to 'be gone' when they don't conform to her view of what the garden should be like.

And we can slam the door to get away from things that hurt and disturb us. We can shut people out - especially when we can't cope with them, or we've disagreed with them. It's easier to avoid people when we know that we owe them an apology. Or if we feel that we've been unfairly treated, we

escape into silence;
we glue ourselves to the TV set to prevent conversation; we shut our door
against the world.

We can also limit our circle of *friends*, shutting out those who make us feel insecure, because they are different from us; we feel safer to shut the door. We are not curious to hear about *their* experience of life and to learn from it. Yet they too are living in God's world; they too can touch the ark of God's presence, for 'the earth is the Lord's all and who dwell therein.'

God sets before us this day a door: an opportunity to seek for truth, to learn from others, to discover what it means for the world to be the garden of God's creation. Like Alice, we shall be surprised what happens if we venture through it.