

Education and the eucatastrophic moment

Commencement Address for Wesley Theological Seminary given in the Washington National Cathedral, May 2019

I want to begin by saying thank you to the President for this invitation....

I am sensible

of the ecumenical hospitality of this cathedral

of the academic honour conferred by WTS

of the humbling list of names of those who have preached from this pulpit.

of the fact that you are a captive audience on what for many of you, is your day!

Today is a great day... for you who have worked hard over years of reading and thinking and writing and re-writing and debating and wrestling and despairing and finding a way through... this is a great day. It has been expressed by some of those I know here, on facebook in the last few weeks, including with the immortal words, 'It is finished!' Appropriate both in the sense of, 'It is ended' (thank goodness! No more submission deadlines!) and, 'it is accomplished (I completed what I set out to do!') And congratulations to you...

And it is a great day for those who have supported you. Your families and perhaps local churches who have made the journey with you, and sometimes had to let you make journeys without them, and who have sacrificed to make this educational opportunity possible... for them it is a great day and they too might echo with you the immortal words, 'It is finished!', with relief! But also with pride in your achievement.

And it is a great day for your teachers, me included, who look at you today with a sense of shared achievement in the work we have done together, and with a sense of relief because the year is over! And pleasure, because the job of education is not to keep even the most delightful students with us, but to send you out to fulfil the purposes for which you came.

Which is to say, of course, that whatever kind of ending today represents, whatever here is finished, whatever here is accomplished, this is also a new beginning, a commencement, a gateway into the new roles in God's mission that you are now equipped to play, through these years of study and with this piece of paper that you will shortly clutch in your hand...

The passage I have chosen for us to reflect upon today as you stand on that threshold between being a graduand and a graduate is the first part of John 10 in which Jesus speaks about himself as the Good Shepherd, the one from whom all pastors derive their name, and in which Jesus speaks about himself as the Gate for the sheep, an image that is perhaps underexploited as an image of ministry, and yet one on which I would like to dwell for a few minutes this afternoon.

Gates are a feature of my daily life in the University city of Cambridge where I live. Unlike most universities, Cambridge is not a campus university but a collegiate university. It is

made up of some 40 colleges and houses of residence of which Wesley House, my college, is one. We each have a mini campus in the town, and so it can be hard for visitors to know where the town ends and the campus begins... 'Where is the university?' they ask... and it can be hard to know quite how to answer.

One option is to tell people to look out for the gatehouses. Often, impressive, brick medieval structures, dating back more than 500 years, they tell you that you are crossing a threshold from the town – where anyone may come and conduct their business – into a different space, a private space, often a grassy space... but a guarded space for which you need the right credentials to enter... and a space with rules.... As the first WTS/Wesley House DMin students discovered... you need special privileges to walk on the grass at King's College. And no, Nick Works, you cannot climb on the priceless horse sculpture in Jesus College main court! (we remember Nick and Carla in our prayers today).

In 2013, when Dean Emeritus, Bruce Birch, came to see me in Cambridge to suggest a partnership between our institutions, Wesley House, was preparing completely to reshape our buildings around a global vision for theological education. We were a bit surprised that our architects insisted upon a new gatehouse. In a constrained space in which we were concerned about housing a library and teaching rooms, a gatehouse seemed an expensive gesture. The architects were ahead of us though, designing a gatehouse that contains all these things but that also houses splendidly designed red metal work gates that proudly announce to town and university, our continued presence and confident identity as a Wesleyan Christian educational institution.

I love these gates. They are distinctive and they are beautiful, but they posed to us all kinds of questions as we planned and installed them. For apart from announcing our presence and our identity, and apart from adding to the beauty of the streetscape, our gates, like all gates, are clearly designed either to keep something in, or to keep something out... and the positioning and the designing of the gates has required us to think about the hours during which the gates will be kept open, and when they will be closed; and we have had to think through other policies too that raise the question of who is a member and who is not – who will have library access and on what terms? Who will have a swipe card? And who will be the gatekeeper who has the final say when it's not clear cut?

Ever since I visited South Africa with some seminary students some 15 years ago I have felt uncomfortable about gated communities. In that context, seeing the wealth that is locked inside them and the poverty that lives at the gates – still by and large divided on racial lines – it made me uncomfortable about living in one myself in a city that boasts the highest proportion of street homeless in the UK. Visiting South Africa was, what J RR Tolkien called a eucatastrophic moment – not a catastrophe in the sense of a disaster but in the more literal Greek meaning of a turning upside down, a revolution, and a good turning upside down at that, in which I began to think not just about how to gain access to and benefit from all that seemed desirable inside the gate, but to see things from the perspective of those outside, without the key code to the abundant life that I was already enjoying within.

Wesley Theological Seminary does not have that kind of gatehouse... and yet education here, as elsewhere, is no less a gateway to a privileged world. Only 7% of the world's population has a college degree, and fewer than 2% hold a doctorate. How are we to handle such privilege when a graduate education brings with it such status and knowledge, economic and other life opportunities, and power to influence the lives of others, beyond the dreams of most of the world?

There are clues in our gospel passage.

The passage read today begins with the image of the true shepherd as the one who comes in by the gate. And who is the true shepherd? He is the one whose desire is for the abundant life of others.

John's Jesus is here is making a deliberate contrast with the Shepherds of Israel, so often blasted by the prophets, whom they condemned for living off the fat and wool of their flocks, putting their own interests first and leaving the sheep to be scattered or killed, peddling false news, seeming to align themselves with the interests of the sheep, but doing so only long enough to make themselves powerful and fat at their expense, claiming to be protecting them whilst leading them to disaster.

Any comparisons with contemporary political leaders in this country or elsewhere are entirely yours to make.

The purpose in the mind of the Good Shepherd, by contrast, is the abundant life of the sheep. This is what the privileged and protective space of the sheepfold is for – so that the sheep may come in and go out and find pasture.

And so the first question that I would leave you with today, those of you who stand on the threshold between being a graduand and a graduate of theology concerns what and who you think your theological education is for?

David Brooks, in the New York Times, last month, wrote a column entitled the Moral Peril of Meritocracy. He speaks about the way in which Western culture tells us that what we need to do with our education is to 'make a mark, become successful, buy a home, raise a family and pursue happiness'. People so engaged, he says, spend a lot of time on reputation management. They ask, 'What do people think of me? Where do I rank?' and they assume, 'I can make myself happy. If I achieve excellence, lose more weight, follow this self-improvement technique, fulfilment will follow.'....

But he says: many of the people I really admire have woken up to the way in which our 'individualist culture inflames ego and numbs spirit'. They figured it out, often through losing something – they lost a job or had cancer or their relationship fell apart. Suddenly the victories of the ego seemed not so important any more... and whilst, he says, some are broken by this, others are broken apart into a realisation that abundant life has little to do with climbing this or that mountain.

Privilege can so easily become the basis of our identity. Even when we have had a theological education that has an inbuilt critique of all that. And brought to the texts of the

Scriptures such privilege can keep us locked within its walls... making us a gatekeeper against those who might remind us of other realities, when the gospel of John invites those with power and status in the community to become the gate-keepers who let in the Good Shepherd and all who follow behind him, in whatever guise they come.

Yet even the image of Jesus the Good Shepherd could be interpreted by those who see themselves on the inside as a tribal one... Jesus, being the one who protects *us* and our people and our interests; the one who puts America first; or Britain, or the Hutu first, the one who lays down his life for his own kind... and many commentators have used this passage and the metaphor of Jesus as the Gate to insist that salvation comes only through Jesus Christ, by which they have meant that Jesus is only interested in people who confess him as Lord; and that salvation comes through Christianity alone, in which case our vision of the use of our theological education can narrow towards the policing of the particular piece of turf we call the Church.

And yet, enigmatically and inconveniently, later in this chapter, Jesus claims to have sheep of another fold. v16: 'I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.'

Perhaps this is only a reference to followers who are both Jews and Gentiles... ; perhaps there is nothing particularly radical here for *us* at all; but the enigmatic saying has led many to suggest that Jesus' concern here as always, is not only for those who count themselves in, but also for others... And for some commentators at least, this is an instance amongst many others in the gospels where Jesus is holding open the gate for those whom even his closest followers would close the gate against...

- the children they shooed away;
- and the blind beggars they tried to silence
- and the woman who was bleeding and contaminatingly unclean because of it...

and perhaps this passage is an indictment of all who would turn Christianity into yet another tribe, the gates of which need to be closely monitored in case anyone should get in by the back door and threaten what we imagine belongs to us.

And those of us with the privilege of a graduate theological education, many of whom already lead communities of faith and many of whom will do so in the future, and some of whom will become gatekeepers of other kinds – to grants, and schools, and appointments and ordinations - we need to take care that we do not spend our power on keeping the gate shut against the Good Shepherd himself, who is trying to bring in those of another pasture, who, according to us, do not have the right credentials.

Gatekeeping is one power that education can grant us. The power to decide who is in and who is out, and there are important questions here today for those of you who stand on the threshold of a new power, represented by the robes you wear and the certificate you will soon have in your hand... about how you will use those powers? And this is the second question that I would leave you with this afternoon. What kind of a gatekeeper will you be?

But it strikes me that for all its dilemmas, gatekeeping is as nothing compared with becoming a gate itself.

In the passage we read Jesus' metaphor shifts away from the notion of gatekeepers who let in or keep out the Good Shepherd, to the image of Christ himself as the gate. Christ himself, who we are bidden to follow, not as the one who is protected at the heart of the gated community, but who, as the gate itself, is simultaneously exposed both on the inside and on the outside – who, in his own person, is the very bridge that joins the two spaces.

The image of Christ as the Gate that is simultaneously both inside and outside reminds me of a trip to the Mexican border with California that I made when the American Academy of Religion was meeting in San Diego. There I watched family members putting their hands up against the double mesh through which nothing – not even communion bread was allowed to pass. It is of course the gates that separate these desperate people from those they love, but somehow also it is the gates that form the bridge. They each touch the gate that is exposed on the inside and on the outside, and they are somehow joined.

John's Jesus offers us Christ as that gate... the one who becomes the bridge that enables what is estranged to be reconciled. But in recent years I have become interested in what it might mean, for those of us, called to follow Christ and called to lead, and educated for that purpose, to see ourselves not only as shepherds and not only as gatekeepers but as gates – as people who in our very bodies choose to put ourselves on the line that bridges faith and non-faith; privilege and non-privilege; life as survival and life in all its fullness.

Becoming such a gate is something that I have learned perhaps a little about as I have travelled around the world seeking to build partnerships for Wesley House that might bring students to Cambridge for theological study; during the two and a half years that we were without a building we were a college without walls, but, it became apparent, not a college without gates... for as the personal ambassador for the college – it was my role to be the personal bridge that is simultaneously exposed on the inside and on the outside of the organisation.

And the easiest way to do this is to go where you know and to people like you. That way your institution doesn't need to change, and neither do you. And yet the call has been not only to Atlanta, and to Seoul and to Washington DC, but to much poorer communities, and to much more remote places, which to visit I have had to put my body on the line through invasive injections, eating untold foodstuffs and going without sleep on planes and in airports without air conditioning.

And in the process my institution has had to change too, becoming a place for global research and global discipleship and global conversation in which white western assumptions can no longer be the default, and in which, daily, new thresholds of understanding have to be crossed.

It has been, in David Brooks' words, a kind of breaking open. The kind of upturning of life that means that you are not any longer living for yourself alone, or for your kind of people, but for something much larger... what Mark Davies, my fellow GBHEM hub director in

Oklahoma, calls the eucatastrophic moment 'when good and compassionate people realise that they must be willing to bring their full and whole lives (even to the point of being willing to sacrifice their lives) to bear on the revolutionary task of turning the world away from fear, hate, darkness and death towards hope, love, light and life.'

And if you think this is just some liberal agenda then hear again from David Brooks, (not known for his liberal views) 'over the past few decades the individual, the self, has been at the centre'. Those who have been broken open are leading us towards a new culture that puts relationships at the centre. 'They ask us to measure our lives by the quality of attachments, to see that life is a qualitative endeavour, not a quantitative one. They ask us to see others at their full depths, and not just as a stereotype, and to have the courage to lead with vulnerability.'

Such people, in the terms of Jesus' image, are willing to be stretched in the tension of holding open the gate, exposed on the inside and on the outside, eschewing happiness for the sake of the joy that comes when we realise that our life is bound up with the life of the whole inhabited earth.

And so the third question that I would pose to those of you who stand on this threshold today, ready to pass through the gateway to a higher degree, concerns your willingness to be the gate for others.

Perhaps your eucatastrophic moment has already happened and this is why you were in seminary or back for a further degree. Perhaps education itself is what has broken you open for the work that God is really wanting you to do. Or perhaps, this is the moment, in this city, today, where so much is at stake for this nation and for the world, perhaps this is the eucatastrophic moment to make the shift from the role of the gatekeeper who stands inside the gate, to the liminal space of the gate that itself, that must be exposed both to the inside and the outside in order to bring life to both worlds.

Perhaps this is the moment to hear what Martin Luther King had to say from this pulpit the week that he died in a sermon entitled, *Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution*.

'One day we will have to stand before the God of history and we will talk in terms of things we've done.

Yes, we will be able to say we built gargantuan bridges to span the seas, we built gigantic buildings to kiss the skies.

Yes, we made our submarines to penetrate oceanic depths.

We brought into being many other things with our scientific and technological power.

It seems that I can hear the God of history saying,

"That was not enough!

But I was hungry, and ye fed me not.

I was naked, and ye clothed me not.

I was devoid of a decent sanitary house to live in, and ye provided no shelter for me.

And consequently, you cannot enter the kingdom of greatness.

If ye do it unto the least of these, my brethren, ye do it unto me."

Perhaps, this is the moment, as you stand on this threshold today, to become a gateway from what is not, to what might be...

For only so, do we really approach what it might mean to be followers of the Good Shepherd who lays down his own life for the sheep, stretched, broken open, yet still, always, faith-full, life facing,

Perhaps only then does education fulfil the promise expressed by Oprah Winfrey (who else?) in an advert for Tennessee State University in the Nashville airport that I photographed on the way here:

'Education is the way to move mountains, to build bridges, to change the world.'

Friends, in your hands... it can be....