

We've shifted from talking about how to live with lockdown to when and how the lockdown might be lifted. One poll suggests that a significant number of people may be reluctant to venture out from the safety of their homes when that happens.

The admission of a churchwarden, which I'm administering at the moment, includes a prayer asking God to *give you grace for your office and bless **your going out and your coming in***. I'm not entirely sure why that latter phrase was chosen in relation to churchwardens, but I recognise it as a quotation from Psalm 121 (*I lift up my eyes to the hills*) which looks to God very much as a source of security and protection. There are echoes of this in today's Gospel reading, in which Jesus gives us two pictures of himself in relation to a sheepfold. In the first, he is the shepherd who legitimately enters the fold and safely leads out the sheep, who trust him *because they know his voice*. Then Jesus shifts the image, and he becomes the *gate*, by way of which the sheep both enter and leave the fold: they *come in and go out*. We recognise the fold as a refuge for the sheep, a place of safety from predators; but it doesn't provide for all their needs, they also need to go out, or be led out, to *find pasture*. The shepherd and the gate provide for both; both are necessary for the fullness of life – which Jesus came to bring.

Our homes are a refuge, a place of safety; but for most of us, they don't provide for all our needs: we need to go out to buy food and other necessities, to work and interact with others. To enjoy life in all its fullness, most of us maintain a balance between *coming in* and *going out* – although that balance may shift through our lives, from times when we were never in, to times when we may be housebound. Now, of course, that balance has been disrupted by Coronavirus: most of us have found that uncomfortable and have had to adjust, for the sake of public health. When restrictions are eased, the Government and businesses will want us to adjust again, and start to venture out for the sake of the economy.

Whatever our domestic situation, home can also stand for the known and familiar – where we feel most comfortable. Adjusting to change can bring the opportunity or necessity of venturing into new territory, leaving our comfort zone – maybe engaging with an *I-pad* or *Zoom* for the first time! Life can be enriched by this kind of *going out* – but there is an inner hurdle to be overcome.

The picture of the Church in the Acts of the Apostles, immediately after the Day of Pentecost, presents the centrality of gatherings both in the temple (the house of God) and in believers' homes. We normally gather to worship in our church buildings; it will be interesting to discover how the enforced switch to worshipping at home has affected us and the Church of England. We miss the interaction with others; but what's it like opening our home to God and the Church on a Sunday morning? Some churches are finding they have a larger on-line congregation than usually makes it to church; while one of my colleagues remarked how good it is that housebound members of his church are currently able to share in the same worship as others.

In Jesus' words, the sheepfold becomes an image for salvation, which we enter through him, the gate. It's perhaps most natural for us to think of faith and Church as our *coming in* to God: he is our refuge. *Going to church* can reinforce that. But the sheepfold doesn't provide for all of the needs of the sheep: they need to go out to find pasture. Faith and Church are also about going out to the world. They're not just about the security of the familiar: they're also about venturing out into the unknown, knowing that the shepherd will lead us. That's something we're experiencing now as the Church under Coronavirus. *As the gate for the sheep*, Jesus presides over both our coming in *and* our going out: both are necessary for life in all its fullness.

Thanks be to God.

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