

On Doorframes, Open Doors, and Doorkeepers

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For the human family, doors are highly significant. They are *significant* in both senses of the word – that is, they are of greatest importance or consequence from our earliest moments of life; they also signify, symbolize, or testify to our nature as persons.

I know a young woman who, as a toddler, spent some frustrating times in our kitchen, crouched by the latched pantry door, actually banging her head on that door, as she repeated in mantra-like fashion: “A cook-*ie*, a cook-*ie*.” For her, the door was significant because it was the gateway and obstacle to the deepest desire of her two-year old imagination – sugared biscuits! It was, no doubt, also symbolic for her of maternal authority, by which alone the door could be unbarred so as to produce its hidden treasures. Eventually, that mother fondly hoped the barred door would come to bespeak an ordered life, one that forbade sweets before lunch.

Doors, though they can confine and frustrate, are (of course) not simply barriers. “Something there is that does not love a wall” – but a door is another matter. It is far more versatile, and witnesses not only to the human need for boundaries, but also to our capacity to close and to open, to enter and to exit, to leave in view and to shut off.

Indeed, the Christian family knows well the importance of doors, for that is one of the pictures regarding himself given to us by the One whom we love: “I am the door.” We are not surprised, then, that reference to concrete and metaphorical doors runs throughout the Scriptures – from the Torah, through the

Wisdom books, to the last book of the New Testament, the Revelation (whose very title, *revelatio*, means an opening of a kind of door, the veil of separation between God and his people).

This afternoon, we stand at the threshold of a new academic year. Picture, if you will, rather than a fabric door, a solid door complete with frames, swung open for our benefit, and attended by a doorkeeper. We go to three passages in Scripture that will guide us in our meditation: Deuteronomy 6, Revelation 4, and Psalm 84.

DOORFRAMES

First, we consider the doorframes.

The sixth chapter of Deuteronomy is key to the understanding of who we are and who God is. It includes the great Shema, the recital, “Hear, O Israel,” which was to be repeated solemnly by those of the Hebrew faith (as it still is today among our Jewish friends): “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” It also contains the first occurrence of that injunction to love God with our whole heart, soul, and strength, that statement given by our Lord as a summary of the first tablet of the Law. These two purple passages regarding the character of God and the human calling to love Him occur in the context of a family gathering, a gathering of the whole of Israel, young and old, men and women. Israel is on the verge of entering through her own open door. She is about to leave behind her time of wandering in the wilderness, to cross the Jordan, and to enter the promised land. Her great prophet and representative, Moses, addresses the assembly, and admonishes them:

Hear, O Israel, The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Remember God's words at all times and in all ways. If the people do this, Moses says, then they will avoid two fatal errors: the assumption that their well-being depends upon their own strength; and the temptation to appeal to the impotent gods of the nations around them. Instead, they will prosper in the Land into which they are about to enter, by the grace and under the protection of the Lord of Israel and the Lord of the Universe.

“Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.” This practice was to be for the Hebrews a potent reminder of the source of their strength and life. Doorframes are, after all, foundational: they are key to the strength of the upper part of the building, and the first thing one sees on entering. In effect, the Lord was telling them to enact a kind of visual pun when they inscribed the words of Torah on their very doorframes: each time anyone entered, and saw God's own words, here was the sign of whose building *they* were as a people. No doubt those words emblazoned there would also have reminded them of the formative time in their corporate life, when God gave them other instructions about the doorframe: on that sacred night, they had put upon the doorframe not words but the blood of a perfect Passover lamb. In both cases, the place of entry reminded them

of the character of their God. Here with them was that One who speaks to his people, entering into intimate relationship with them. Here was that One who cares for his people, making sacrifice and provision for their safety and life.

What is written upon the doorframes of Augustine College? What are its visible reminders, its signs of the grace and strength of the only living God?

In terms of its purpose, our college is a kind of doorway, a first year into the study of significant figures, ideas and movements. Your teachers hope that this year will be the beginning of an ongoing quest and way of life for you – the first chapter in a disciplined and principled way of learning that will last your whole life. Like the ancient Hebrew people, we too would write the word of God upon our entranceways, to be seen not only by ourselves but by any in our company.

Our outward appeal to these Scriptures must be matched by an intimate and thorough knowledge of God's word – far be it from us to appeal to the Bible in a formal way, without seeking to bind it on our foreheads, arms, hearts, and minds! For we are those who have been invited into God's *new covenant*. We thus know that the Word of God is not *contained* by a book (though it is truly found there!) but is in fact a person, our Lord Jesus Christ. God's Word is the One who speaks to us by his Spirit, the One who calls, purifies, and strengthens every member of the household of God. Our doorframes, too, are marked with sacrificial blood – his very own. As we have been claimed and built up by the crucified, risen, and ascended Jesus, we write upon our doors and gates the names of many who witness to God's power and wisdom and love. The last few chapters of the New Testament speak about that holy city, the New Jerusalem, upon whose gates are written the names of the tribes of Israel, and upon whose foundations are written the names

of the apostles. The people of God are to be, quite literally, surrounded by the faithful who have gone before.

In the same way we are accompanied at Augustine College by those who have known Jesus before us and who have sought to express this love through the effort of study and prayer. I am speaking both of those still physically among us, and of those who now behold his face. This is not our house alone, but theirs as well, for we are one household, the household of those called to trust in Jesus and so to learn. Our very name celebrates the wisdom, fervour and influence of Augustine of Hippo, who continues to remind us:

Credo ut intelligam – I believe that I might understand.

There are other names written upon these doorframes, too – the names of those whom the Spirit quickened to write Scriptures, such as Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, St. John, St. Luke, St. Paul. Important to us, too, are the names of our other siblings in Christ, of those who heard, read, and inwardly digested the words of Scripture, struggling with them and interpreting them for their day but also for our benefit – names like St. Athanasios, St. Chrysostom, St. Thomas Aquinas, Cranmer, Calvin, John Wesley. Time does not permit me to tell, there is such a cloud of witnesses. As we live and think, read and write together, members of Augustine College detect more and more inscriptions upon the door of entry. As many have discovered, “I read to know that I am not alone.” In an age which both carelessly and deliberately has turned its face away from the living past, we recover as household names those who have been this way before, and to whom we are indebted, whether we know it or not. In coming to know faithful students and thinkers of the past, we discover in increasing measure what

St. Paul meant when he spoke about the household of God as one which is growing into a holy temple, built together into a dwelling place for God (Eph. 2:20).

Here, then, is a doorframe marked by God’s own word, and the names of those many beloved who handled that word with love and faithfulness. Here are the visible symbols of our hidden foundations in Christ.

OPEN DOORS

The door itself stands open.

As the marked doorframe speaks of our foundations, the open door indicates our enlivened vision, the perspective given to us because we are in Christ. In the fourth chapter of the Apocalypse, the seer John tells us how he saw a door standing open in heaven, and how he was invited by the divine voice, “Come up here” so that he could see from a new perspective. The divine panorama shown to John was staggering, encompassing heaven and earth, glimpsing significant moments of the past, present, and future.

We have tended to think of such revelations as esoteric, for the visionary’s eyes only, and requiring the careful decoding of experts if they are to be understood. But the whole point of John’s open door is that the revelation or unveiling has occurred for the benefit of all God’s people. This is the revelation of Jesus Christ that God gave to John to show his servants. This divine perspective, then, is the blessing conferred upon all those who are in Christ, who have been given the Spirit so that they can have the mind of Christ.

As Paul puts it in Ephesians, we are even now ‘seated with Christ in heavenly places.’ We are given the gift of a bird’s-eye view, so to speak. Yet the perspective is not automatic: we must allow

the Spirit to cultivate it so that we put on the mind of Christ.

With John, let us gaze at our true surroundings. Chapters 4 to 5 of the book of Revelation give us an insight into reality, into the way things are. They are a magnet, drawing our eye to what is truly significant. What do we find in this book, as with John we see from the Christly perspective?

First of all, we see the centre of the picture: “At once, I was in the Spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne with one seated on the throne” (4:2). The ruling and majestic Lord is the centre of the entire scene. His glory can barely be described, and yet he is attended by others on 24 thrones, by human representatives of those in covenant with God – 12 for the ancient people of Israel, 12 for those called through the new covenant. God’s glory is not usurped by these others, but displayed in them, for it is by his power that they too shine. John’s first glimpse of reality, then, is of the divine might, control, and victory, a power that God graciously shares with his people.

Let us not think that this is a utopian vision, an unreal hope for perfection or a spiritual condition that ignores our reality, the fallen and concrete world of which we are all too well aware. Surrounding this great scene of victory are the four strange creatures that symbolise the various aspects of our physical world – flying, walking, and thinking creatures. These too join in the praise. All of the creation, great and small, are brightened, drawn, and compelled by the One in the centre. Nor is God afraid to show John what happens when the harmonious scene is disturbed. For there is, within this heavenly scene of adoration, an element of drama. There is a mysterious scroll that cannot be opened, a frustration that moves John himself to tears. His prophetic crying, his weeping that signifies our own human lament, is not ignored. He is not

ushered out of the throne room and back through the door so that the celestial music can continue undisturbed. Rather, one of the elders directs him to the One who makes sense and brings life out of suffering, the ruling Lion who is a slaughtered risen Lamb. He it is who has died, risen, and ascended, who can open the scrolls. It is by him, the one who shares the throne of the Father, and who also walks among humankind, that a new song comes into being. What we thought might vitiate peace, glory, and joy now adds its own accents to the worship: suffering itself is made to sing!

No doubt there are many other insights to be gained as we seek the mind of Christ, allowing him to place us in heavenly realms. But these few things are enough to start. The view through the open door stamps upon our imagination three startling images:

that of a God who rules in joy, when all around we are tempted to see defeat and the mediocrity of evil;

that of a God who does not ignore the human plight, but who opens to us the mysteries of life and who has, incredibly, called us to reign with him;

that of a God who has provided a Lion-Lamb to answer our tears and folly, so that suffering itself is no longer meaningless, but incorporated into the song of life.

We see from this perspective that reality is both simple and complex. It is simple, in that there is one thing necessary, that is, to sit at the feet of the One who has called us, to hear, to learn, and to love him. But reality is complex in that God’s view encompasses the whole of creation and we are being shone upon by the Spirit so that we can see and love this creation as God does. Here before us, the world is wholly new, for it is to be seen with the mind of Christ.

For those entering the door offered by Augustine College, there will be the necessary rigours and bracing reality of entering into a community that seeks to think critically and faithfully. There will be times when we are confronted by sealed scrolls and when we are moved to weep. True learning is to admit that we do not have the whole picture, but to believe that our Lord does. *I believe that I might understand.* This is not blind trust, but belief in what God can and will do in our lives and in this community, because we have already seen enough of his character, tasted enough of his love, to hope. That hope must extend to what God can do in our own impoverished and sad society.

Many who come to this college do so because of disillusionment with the alternatives, with what the twenty-first century considers an education. Our studies will reassure us that this is not the first time God's people have faced darkness; it will also, I hope, foster a living hope that God is even now reclaiming humanity, and that we have – this is quite amazing! – been given roles in this divine drama.

To speak of hope and our role moves us to the final detail of the picture before us. The blood-smeared and engraved doorframes, the open door, are attended by a doorkeeper.

DOORKEEPERS

The doorkeeper speaks of our position.

Perhaps our first inclination is to think of the doorkeeper as an exalted figure, something like a guardian who combines the role of usher and bouncer. Yet more often in the scriptures the doorkeeper is seen as a humble worker, one who has a modest part to play in the household. More than once we see women fulfilling this function in an age when women's occupations were more circumscribed. Think of the unnamed girl who (during the trial of Jesus) confronts Peter at the

gate of the high-priest's house (John 18:16), or the comic Rhoda who answers the door for Peter when he has been delivered from prison but then, in her excitement, leaves it closed on him (Acts 12:13). Certainly the Psalmist underscores this notion of the lowliness of the doorkeeper when he declares, "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness" (Psalm 84:10). After all, a doorkeeper has to be occupied with the point of entry, and may miss some of the action in the central part of the house. The doorkeeper may have the function of opening and shutting, but does so at the direction of the owner. It would be a strange servant who put on airs because he or she had the power over entry. As Kazuo Ishiguro describes a "great butler" in his novel, *The Remains of the Day*, "it is the very lack of obvious ... spectacle that sets the beauty of the [role] apart" (28).

It may well be that not a few of those who come to Augustine College in this year, or previous years, or subsequent years, will play prominent roles in our society, insofar as prominence is measured today. Some may play more modest parts, no less important in God's eyes. We are thrilled as a faculty to follow the lives of our students and to find them already making an impact upon those around them. Be that as it may, all the reading, thinking, and learning will come to naught if true humility is not actively pursued.

Having once entered the house of learning, we are given to be doorkeepers, welcoming others who would enter. Again, once having entered the house, it would be sad if we thought we had *arrived*, that we were 'educated', that we are now set apart in a qualitative sense from those who have not had our opportunities. I remember vividly the impression that my own undergraduate convocation made upon me at the

end of four years of study in English and classics. I came to that day at the ripe age of 21, having been initiated for four years into the mysteries of hermeneutics, literary analysis, Aristophanes, Cicero, Middle English, Stanley Fish, and T. S. Eliot. It would have been easy to assume the role of the dilettante, to glory in the fact that I could now name-drop, comfortable amidst the company of other specialists in humanities. My ease and exaggerated sense of accomplishment was nipped in the bud by the words of the College principal before whom I knelt as she greeted me. *Admitto te* was all she said. She opened the door, admitting me into this huge new world. I had not arrived, I realized: I had barely begun.

Her words were not discouraging, but bracing. I realized that the room into which I had entered was not enclosed or narrow, but that it opened out into a vista that went on beyond what I could see or imagine. For true learning would be to think God's thoughts after him, and that would take more than a lifetime.

This side of the New Jerusalem, we find ourselves in an ambiguous position. In one sense, we have entered, for in Christ we are seated in heavenly places, and the Lord no longer considers us servants but friends. So we can exclaim "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! ... Even the sparrow finds a home.... My heart and my flesh sing for joy in the living God." Yet, we are also on pilgrimage: we are those who depend wholly on his grace, and who have not arrived.

On that note, we agree with the writer to the Hebrews, who reminds us we have here no permanent city. We cry with the Psalmist: "My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD.... Happy are those who strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways of Zion.... They go from strength to strength." (Psalm 84)

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew
back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow
slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lacked any thing.

"A guest," I answered, "worthy to be here":
Love said, "You shall be he."

"I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
I cannot look on thee."

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
"Who made the eyes but I?"

"Truth, Lord, but I have marred them: let
my shame

Go where it doth deserve."

"And know you not," says Love, "who bore
the blame?"

"My dear, then I will serve."

"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste
my meat":

So I did sit and eat.

(George Herbert)

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