

Sermon: District Synod Opening Service

Text: John 10:1-10

Theme: One Church, Many Doors

South Australia is proudly known as the Wine State. This state is home to almost seven hundred wineries, and it produces over 500 million litres of wine a year. Wine tourism is very popular, and many of us would have our favourite region and the wineries that we love to visit.

Wineries are invariably located in beautiful locations. Vineyards are picturesque all year round, and especially in autumn, as the vines turn yellow and red. Cellar doors have become destinations in their own right, and not just because of the wine but also the food and the view.

Have you wondered why wineries call their customer focused space the cellar door? Some of the older wineries do have cellars, but the new flash glass and concrete venues don't. Perhaps it's a marketing technique designed to entice us to come through the door into this homely space to be treated as an honoured guest. And whereas once upon a time we used to gather around the bar, now wineries direct us to a table, where they come to us and serve us some of their wines and invite us to share a meal too. They hope that we will enjoy the wine, and the service, and that we will purchase some of their finest drops.. And not only that; they also want us to share the story of the winery itself with other people. They want us to go out through the cellar door not just weighed down with wine but also as evangelists for what they do. And from experience, I have to say that it works.

Many of our congregations are in wine growing areas, the Barossa Valley of course, the Riverland, McLaren Vale, the Clare Valley, the Adelaide Hills, the Coonawarra. Wineries and cellars doors far outnumber churches, even in the Barossa. Nevertheless, across South Australia and Northern Territory, and even a congregation in Broken Hill and Murrayville in Victoria, we have well over 150 church doors. Some are surrounded by vineyards, some are in the city or a regional centre, some in the scrub all by themselves. Some of these churches have been there since the mid 1800's, some only thirty or forty years. What's their story? Who are the people behind the doors? What do they have to offer to the community around them?

You and I are the people who walk in and out these church doors. We are the people who tell the story of why the church was built in the first place. In some cases, this was the first building constructed in the locality, and certainly the largest and most significant. If the walls had ears, and mouths, what would they say about what has taken place in these spaces Sunday across Sunday for many, many years: sermons heard and pondered, children and others brought to the waters of Holy Baptism, Jesus' Holy Meal being received by people hungry and thirsty for God's grace and hope; people singing, praising, lamenting, crying, caring, serving.

One church, many doors. This is the theme of this year's District Convention. All of our churches have doors. Some of them are made of solid wood. They've been aged by use and by the elements. Others are made of glass and function like a window into the building. Doors are the entry way into our buildings, and we ensure that people stand by them to welcome friends and strangers. They're also the way that we exit the building and head back out into the weekday world of work and family, of friends and recreation, of relationships both good and difficult, of a world lost and still loved by God.

One church, many doors. Our Synod theme starts with our church, school, or aged buildings. They are structures that point beyond themselves to the people and the purpose within. The church door is an entry point for our community into the grace and mercy of God through the proclamation of the good news.

We share the words and stories of God's engagement with the world, his creation, his chosen people, their wayward ways and his constant care and concern, the sending of his Son Jesus as sacrifice and Saviour for the whole world, his life, death and resurrection, the birth of the church through the gift of the Holy Spirit and the unpacking of what the gospel means through the letter of Paul, Peter, John, James and some others.

Today again we have heard the good news: **“Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full”** (John 10.7-10). Did you catch the word gate? It can also mean door. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. His words and his death are the way into the Father's heart of love. As people enter the doors of our churches, they hear about the one who is the door, the gate, the way that God enters our lives.

The Apostle Paul reflects on what Jesus' life means for us. He is our peace. By the chaos and pain of his death, he has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between us and God. Through him **“we have access to the Father by one Spirit.”** The curtain has been torn down; the doorway opened. As Jesus stood right in the midst of his disciples on that Easter Sunday night, closed doors cannot keep him out of our lives. He has the power to open hearts and minds to receive him.

One church, many doors. This isn't just about church buildings. It's about what God is doing in us and through us. This is what Paul proclaims to us today. We are **“fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²²And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”** (Eph. 2.19-22) One church, a living breathing people of God. Yes, we gather in particular places and spaces, from Yalata and Ceduna to Broken Hill, from Mount Gambier to Darwin and many places in between. But when God has done his healing work through Word and Sacrament, we are sent out through those same doors by which we entered. The church has legs, arms too, and mouths. You and I are holy temples, and filled with the life of our living Lord Jesus, and our lives are doors through which people can enter into the story of Jesus. **One church, many doors.** Many, many more doors than we have buildings.

In the Bible, the word 'door' can have the sense of a new opportunity. Paul often uses it this way. He writes to the church in Corinth, **“I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened for me”** (1 Cor. 16.8). He tells the church in Colossae: **“Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains”** (Col. 4.2-3). And in John's Revelation, Jesus speaks to the angel of the church in Philadelphia: **“These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. ⁸I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name”** (Rev. 3.7,8). What a powerful promise to us as we witness to the love of God in Christ Jesus in and through our lives, and our life story.”

As God has led the SA-NT District to this theme, he's being doing the same thing in the Queensland District. Is it coincidence, or more likely, what I call a God-incidence. I share some words from Bishop Mark Vainikka: **“In his sermon before his election as the Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis quoted the words of the book of Revelation: [Jesus said] ‘I stand at the door and knock’ (Rev 3.10). Pope Francis added: ‘Today Jesus knocks from the other side, from inside the church-he wants to go out, and we must follow him. He**

wants to go first of all to the marginalised, to those on the margins of society and the church, to the poor, the exploited, he goes where people are hurting. The church is to be a field hospital where wounds-physical, social psychological and spiritual-are dressed and healed.”

Wineries have cellar doors. We have church doors. Winery décor and design is more stylish than many of our churches. But I pray that when people come through our church doors, they are blessed by our welcome and hospitality, not our architecture, and captivated by the good news they hear. And when they leave, as we do too, may we together be God’s church in the world, and share the good news of Jesus, the door for the sheep, the way, the truth and the life.

One church, many, many doors.

Peace in Christ

Pastor Andrew Brook

Bishop, LCA SA-NT District