

No Door Between

A Christmas Meditation.

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Closed doors can be cruel things.

Indeed, a door is a sort of symbol of man's distrust of his fellow men. When a man has slammed and bolted his door, he feels safe; but he has shut out his fellows — both those who come bearing arms and those who come bearing gifts.

There was a time when architects worked with intricate skill to make doors seem less final, less repelling. Craftsmen fashioned large and beautifully ornamental knockers that invited the visitor's hand to stretch out and grip them. But knockers were soon resigned to the morgues of history. They were too emphatic, too demanding, too insistent; doors were made, not to be opened, but to be closed and securely locked.

Architects clothed doors with the warmth of carved wood and finely chiselled stone. They broke severe austerity into graceful panels that looked as if a hearty rap might split them and admit a glimpse of the people of the house. They made an art of the designing of doorknobs; then they neutralized that art with science — next to the doorknob they placed the pickproof lock.

Behind closed doors man has hidden his joys and his loves; behind closed doors he has also hidden his fears and his hates.

Closed doors can be ugly things.

For long dreary centuries the doors of God's heaven were sternly locked in the face of mankind. Once there had been an easy avenue connecting the Garden of Paradise with the eternal garden of God's delight. Hand in hand along that avenue walked a man and a woman, richly happy, headed straight for the broad, wide-open doorway that would admit them into their eternal home. God, the Divine Householder, waited for the arrival of His children. One doorway to this eternal home He had already blocked, closed and bolted the door, the doorway through which the evil angels had in rebellion rushed headlong to the hideous kingdom of hell. Yet scarcely had He bolted that door with an eternal fastness when He opened the new door, and He smiled as He looked -down the gentle incline along which His newly created son and daughter were walking, passing through gardens and orchards in their journey from a swiftly passing paradise to a paradise without end.

And then God's smile faded, for His son and daughter had failed Him. So — reluctantly this time, for He loved that son and daughter — God the Father barred the doorway to earth; with infinite yearning and divine regret He closed the portal in the faces of the children for whose sake it had been carved, for whose reception it had been flung open.

And the first man and the first woman, the first of the children of men, knew the cruel finality of a closed door.

That knowledge was terrible, for they could not see behind that door. They could not know that in the keeping of God the Son, God the Father had placed the key to that door. Only this they knew: that some day, somehow, that door would again be flung open by the master locksmith, who would lead them through the doorway that had been blocked by their sin and folly.

That first man and woman, driven from the Garden of Paradise, became homeless wanderers. They ate the bread of toil. In pain were their children begotten. The winters were biting cold, and the summers were scorchingly hot. And the first man and the first woman knew that they were indeed locked out of their Father's house. Beggars, they lived at an unopened door.

Closed doors can be cruel things.

The Roman populace, greedy for the coins that they knew would be tossed to them the minute the good news came, waited outside the imperial palace.

Their eyes rested upon the huge iron door that was studded with bronze knobs, heavy with the weight of hinges, and massive with the security of shot bolt.

Somewhere behind that door the child of an emperor was being born, the Mob was, grateful for such an event. It meant that free loaves would be passed among them. A sweaty-armed steward would probably knock in the head of a wine cask, and they could catch the red, vinegary wine in their cupped hands or their leather caps. Almost everyone in the mob had a friend or a relative in jail, and if the child should be a boy, the emperor, in a demonstrative gesture, might release a handful of the prisoners. At any rate, there would be blowing of trumpets and ruffle of drums and flying of pennants. And if the child was a male child, the emperor might even match the gladiators or turn the tigers loose on some of the captive barbarians.

So the mob watched the door greedily.

Several times it swung open at the forceful push of a sentry to admit a patrician. One of these nobles made a very obvious display of his distaste for the mob by holding his nose against the sweaty, unwashed odours about him. And the mob laughed good-naturedly at this insult.

Vainly they craned their necks in an attempt to catch a glimpse of what was going on behind that door. But no one of them was fool enough even to dream of trying to enter the palace. Maybe some Praetorian officer standing at a remote window would hold the new-born child before the mob and would from that safe distance let them lift their eyes in awed respect and their voices in humble shout. But that would be all. It was fitting that the new-born child of an emperor should have the protection of a locked door. The common man from the muddy alleys dared not besmirch the nursery with his presence or inflict his insignificance on new-born royalty.

There was a flurry of excitement among the sentries at the door. A rasped order brought heels together and chins at sharp angle. Two brawny centurions sprang forward, and under the impact of their hairy arms the door swung slowly, as if reluctantly, open.

Framed in the doorway, luscious in velvet and flying eagle plumes, stood a herald. One step forward brought him out of the shadow of the doorway and into the light of the street. The brassy sides of the trumpet which he raised to his lips contemptuously tossed back the slant of the sun.

The trumpet blast ripped a gash in the air. Instantly the populace was brought to wire-edged attention. The herald swung his trumpet in gleaming arc to his hip, and then his voice, like the bragging of an insolent cock, sounded over the crowd:

“The prince is born. Your emperor has a son!”

The voices of the mob struck and rebounded from the walls of Caesar’s palace. Then, because they hoped that a shower of coin would follow the thunder of the herald’s voice, and because they honestly desired to see the new-born prince, the mob surged forward.

The herald’s thundering voice grew more thundering. “Bar the door!” he ordered.

The hairy arms of the centurions swung the door shut. And the crowd that was impelled by the mingling of greed and honest hope to rush forward, could do no more than see through the lattice of slanting, through the points of lances, the closed door that cruelly barred their way to the presence of their prince.

Would the world’s true King, its Prince of Peace, when He came, would He too be barred from His people by closed doors? Would there not at least be bread when His time of arrival was at last manifest?

The shrill notes of silver bugles sounded from the corners of the Temple and cascaded from stone terrace to stone terrace, dropping over the bent heads of the worshippers, who, grouped according to their rank, filled every court, from the court nearest the Gate of the Strangers to the sanctuary of the priests.

Again the bugles rained their silver coin of music. Every head bowed lower. For all knew that the high priest was about to enter the holy of holies. Alone he would stand in the presence of God, speaking to Him for the people, listening while out of the pregnant silence God gave His august commands.

The notes of the bugles fastened more tightly upon the people the silver chains of silence. The high priest lifted the long silken veil that covered the inner court where God waited for the coming of His representative. And outside, the people waited and prayed.

The Persian astronomer had long been impressed with the faith of Judea. He felt that only in the one God of the Jews could there possibly be found the explanation of the perfect unity of the stars in their ordered dance. And when he turned from stars to men, he was convinced that only the coming of a divine Messiah such as the Jews believed would come could raise man from his gutters and his traps and set him on the road that led to God. The astronomer had come to Jerusalem in the hope of being able to visit the Temple, to talk with some of the learned men, to sit in the cool shade of the porches of the house of Jahweh (the One Who Is) and read the promises written in the sacred books.

The great bronze doors of the Temple were shut. Across them were stretched bands of brass, and the surface was flat with the jambs, indicating that a bolt or heavy bar inside held the door securely shut. Temple guards stood at attention, their leather-and-metal uniforms dull and menacing in the gloom of the Temple’s high walls.

The Persian drew near the door, his respect deepening as he saw how carefully these Jews guarded their Temple, how rigorously they protected the sacred mysteries that lay within. Yet doubtless they would be happy to welcome a stranger who, in the frank hope that he would be permitted to bend

his mind to the law and his knee to the great law-giver, had come all the way from the East to listen and to learn.

He paused before the fast-barred Temple door. Probably there was a smaller, a secondary door by which he could enter.

With quiet dignity and humble eagerness he approached a guard. When, he asked, would the door be opened? When might a stranger enter into the presence of God's learned, perhaps even find his way into the presence of Judah's God?

The sentry's loose, resentful lip curled in scorn. He spat into the dust of the street. His contempt was deliberate, an intended affront to this stranger who was a representative of the hated Gentile races; no doubt the stranger, prompted by some obscene curiosity, had come to look at the house of God in order to scoff.

The sentry insolently threw the question back. "When does this door open?" he said, leaning forward and touching the gate with the point of his lance. It was a gesture at once proprietary and threatening. The door was his, the true believer's. And a spearhead guarded it from the profanation of the stranger. "When does it open?" repeated the sentry. "Never to a son of the outcast races! Never to an unbeliever!"

And while the silver bugles trickled their notes down the courts and down the stairs of the Temple, the Persian stood, disappointed, his eyes fixed sadly upon the door that shut out his hope of learning what he felt was the truth, and that barred him from those learned men who could lead him to his Lord. And he realised that closed doors can be cruel things.

Would the True God always be hid behind the closed doors of the Chosen Nation? Would His Kingdom not have space for the poor Gentile?

During the happy days before his marriage to Mary, Joseph the carpenter busied himself with remodelling the little house in Nazareth that some remote ancestor had left to him. He strengthened the beams. He widened the windows, finishing them with shutters that swung so easily that even the gentle touch of the young Mary would be sufficient to open and close them without difficulty. He levelled the uneven floors. He fitted the cases against the walls and fixed a table that had swayed lamely because of a short, limping leg.

But it was on the door that he lavished special attention. That door was to him a symbol. It must be strong, he reflected, as he selected a piece of sturdy, seasoned cypress. It must swing open easily when pushed from within. It must resist the strongest arm that might push it from without.

After he finished the day's work for his customers, Joseph remained in his little carpenter's shop, and far into the early hours of the morning he worked on that door. This door must have, not hinges of leather, but hinges of iron, and sturdy, tested iron at that. With great care he chose the timber that was to serve as the crossbar, shaping it so that it would be stout and strong, balancing it on the spike in such a way that even the light touch of a maiden's hand would be sufficient to cause it to swing down and hold the door immovable. It was to be a door that all the battering of a Roman cohort could not smash.

When finally he put the door in place — the finishing touch to the house he had remodelled for his maiden bride — he stroked it with approving fingers. Behind that door, he thought, she would be

safe. And one day the Child would play in this house in safety, out of reach of all danger, for this door, once swung to and bolted, was assurance of security.

Mary and Joseph returned from their simple wedding. Their relatives, accompanied by the village's lowliest flute player, escorted them to the threshold of the little house. Joseph took Mary's hand and led her into her new home. Gently he closed the door. Firmly he swung the crossbar into place.

"Here you are home," he said, softly, "and safe. And when He comes, He that is the Child of the Holy Spirit, that door will stand between Him and the dangers that stalk our city. No dirty hand of beggar nor grasping hand of thief, no soiling pagan touch, no envious claw can reach Him here. Behind that door, Mary, we are safe from the threat of strangers and from the intrusion of friends."

Mary smiled. He was sweet to have thought so dearly of her and the unborn Child. And then her smile grew deeper and a little mysterious.

Would He, she wondered, want a door between Him and the world He was to save?

Doors can be such cruel things.

Bethlehem — and the slamming of doors, the banging of doors, the acid sound of voices behind doors that the owners did not intend to open.

Joseph hadn't dreamed that a door could be so cruel. Almost, he felt, as if they had become human, like the householders, throwing back in cynical echoes the sound of his timid knock. Or were those echoes that he heard, the echoes of the laughter that followed his knock?

It was a mocking innkeeper that held open the door of his inn a few inches and surveyed the poor travellers. How absurd for a couple like this to come asking for lodgings in an inn that was housing wealthy merchants returned from Jerusalem, and relatives of the mayor of the village, who was taking advantage of the occasion of the census to hold a great family reunion in celebration of the marriage of his eldest daughter. The innkeeper slammed the door with a rude "no room," and slapped the crossbar back into place.

Standing at the opened door — a broad, well-carved, heavily hinged door of the rich — Joseph realised anew that this successful merchant cousin of his despised him. This relative had made a fortune, and he did not like to be reminded that one of his relations, even though a distant one, was an unsuccessful carpenter. So when he had enumerated a dozen reasons for his not wanting to shelter a cousin who was so regrettably poor, the merchant swung the heavy door gently shut. And Joseph felt the sting of its quiet closing more keenly than he would have felt a slap on his cheek.

Doors everywhere, doors that shut in the sounds of happy singing; doors behind which men and women probably sat at table, drinking to friends and relatives; doors that gave every evidence of guarding the fine furnishings of the rich; doors that looked as if they were hiding, mercifully, the poor, shabby, broken furniture of the less fortunate. Joseph could only guess what lay behind these doors. He saw only the cold blankness of them as they were shut in his face, slammed in his face, insistently thrust against him, cutting off, as they closed, a feeble excuse or a jeering rejection.

There were that night in Jerusalem, as in Bethlehem, houses that rocked with mirth and hugged snug families in their warm shelter. But Joseph and Mary knew only the blankness and the cruelty of the doors of these same houses of Bethlehem.

A steep incline in the hill brought them to the cave that the shepherds had described to them.

Joseph looked at it and shook his head despairfully.

“We cannot stop here,” he said. “It would never do. This is a stable, a place for animals... You in a stable, Mary? He? To come into the world on this dirt floor covered with the ancient dung of beasts? No. Let us go farther and see what better we can find.”

Mary only smiled wanly, but her sagging weight on his arm was answer enough. They could go no farther that night. She was too utterly weary. The Child was too, too close.

The stars, hanging in festoons, in the wintry sky, seemed almost within reach of their hands. Far towards the horizon a new star, bright as no other star that poised above them, was travelling across the purple vault like a messenger running full tilt on some pressing errand. Joseph’s gaze swept the landscape anxiously. On the nearby hill he saw the soft silhouette of a motionless flock, sheep at rest, the shepherds probably asleep somewhere close by. As he looked, he heard the gentle tinkle of bells. Probably a passing caravan, one of the many that moved from East to West, shuttling back and forth with the commerce of a busy and thrifty though adventurous people.

Joseph turned his eyes away. There was nothing for them but this cave that had lately been a stable; this, was their only refuge. A hundred fears thronged his mind. Would robbers thrust their rude, dangerous presence into the cave? Would the shepherds themselves choose to come here to revel when the sheep were safe and they bored with watching? Would it not be easy for men of the caravan, unscrupulous fellows who would slit a throat for the sake of a brass ring, to turn aside from the highway, burst into the cave, and fill the night with their oaths and press upon himself and Mary their dangerous company?

Joseph lifted his head in a gesture that expressed hopelessness, desire for something that could not be.

“If only the cave had a door,” he said, softly.

He turned and entered the cave, speeding his lagging steps in his anxiety to clear a space for Mary and the expected Child.

Mary had been leaning against the cold outer wall of the stable cave. Her glance, too, took in that landscape, purple and green and deeply blue under the garlands of stars. She too saw the shepherds on the distant hill. And now the music of a lone flute came to her like a wistful lullaby. She saw along the highroad the undulating sway of camels, a caravan coming from the West and heading towards the East. The white roofs of far-distant Jerusalem, and of much closer Bethlehem, now seemingly armoured in steel blue, covered, she knew, men and their families, old people who were impatient because the coming of the Messiah was so long delayed, young people who were dreaming of perhaps being in His army, women who were sighing for a God-Man to lift them to their feet, the poor who were wondering whether God ever thought of them.

They were all there, down those highways, along those unlighted alleys, on the slopes of those green-spread hills, in the little farms and the heedless villages — all the dear, thoughtless children of men that He was coming to save. Only a little while now, and He would be with them. Only a little while, and His yearning would reach out to draw them into the warm circle of His love, into the irresistible charm of His divinity, that would be clad in humanity’s dearest disguise. They there... He here... And between them...?

Oh! between them there must never be any obstacle. They must be free to come to Him, whether they be driven by want or drawn by affection, whether they be fleeing from enemies or running toward a friend, they must be able to find Him as easily as they could find one seated on a mount or in the prow of an open ship. Between Him and those for whose love He had broken open the gates of heaven, those for whom He would seal the gates of hell, those whose beloved names He had already placed upon the doors of many mansions — between these children and Him there must never be the smallest barrier.

With a yearning that she knew was not hers alone Mary stretched out her arms to embrace a needy world. Then she drew them back to her heart in an embrace that held close and dear the world that was within her, the Word Incarnate.

Joseph appeared at the open mouth of the cave. His face still mirrored his troubled heart.

“I should feel safer for both of you,” he said, “if there were a door to this cave.”

But Mary smiled at him with all the brave reassurance of her soul. She looked back briefly at the shepherds, the caravans, the marching soldiers, the villagers who were laughing or gambling or sleeping. And she touched the open mouth of the cave with tenderness.

“I am glad that there is no door,” she whispered.

And Mary walked into the cave to give the world the God Who was to fling open the doors of heaven, and with a lance open the door of His heart in endless welcome to the weary traveler — man.
