

Open season

Luke 9:1-20

Have you ever heard people say, 'When one door closes, another one opens?' How often have you spoken about God closing doors that aren't meant to be gone through, and opening doors you might not have expected? There's a whole language of 'open' and 'closed' that gets used, both inside and outside the church.

Lots of things are closed... or look like they are heading that way. There are people that seem closed to the gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ. Society is experiencing closure and decline in public services and community facilities. And there's the closure of church buildings all around the nation.

Not least, the elephant in the room and the news of the week is that it is proposed that Dores Church building be closed sooner rather than later. We can talk about that along with lots of other things to do with the changes in our churches in our Q&A time later on, but here's the question just now as we look at God's Word in Luke 9:1-20 today - *how are God's people to live in a world so full of closed-ness?*

The answer to closed-ness, of course, is open-ness. And the three ways I believe God tells us to open up are these:

Let's open our mouths. Let's open our wallets. Let's open our homes.

I think this is going to challenge all of us to change in pretty significant ways as we head into another year of knowing and serving Jesus together.

In Luke 9 we read one of the most famous events in Jesus' ministry; the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 (probably more like 10,000 when you included women and children). And Luke tells us that it was surrounded by Jesus-talk.

Just before the feeding of the crowd, in vv.7-9, you've got people wondering who Jesus is - a prophet from long ago, Elijah, John the Baptist back from the dead? And you've got Herod, the Jewish puppet king installed by the Romans in Galilee, wondering what to make of it all.

After the feeding, you've got the same themes in a discussion with the disciples in vv.18-20 - who is Jesus, is he a prophet, Elijah, John? And you've got Peter confidently professing, 'You are the Christ of God.' In other

words, 'you are the one true King sent by God who is going to rescue us, and whom we're supposed to bow to and put all our hope in.'

There's *talk* about Jesus. There's murmurings and wonderings; discussion and debate. It's a million miles from where we are today, where outside of the church, nobody's talking about Jesus. It's not that they're for or against Him; they just don't care about Him, because He's not on their radar. Because nobody's putting Him in the public imagination.

What produced these murmurings amongst people? These discussions which led to a king not being able to see it and understand, and an uneducated fisherman getting it and saying it out loud? Well, it goes back to vv.2-6, where Jesus sends his disciples out - to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.

And it's *because* they do that (v.6 says they obeyed that commission) - because they open their mouths, all of them, in the different places that they go and rub shoulders with others - that there's a buzz around Galilee... there's a noise around the lake and its villages... it's a topic of conversation for people: 'Who do you think Jesus is?'

My prayer today is simply that Jesus even becomes a topic of conversation for our communities. That from Stratherrick Road to Stratherrick, people will be wondering about Jesus - enough to say talk about it. I imagine that, like the people we read about in this passage, some will be interested and others won't, lots of people will get the wrong end of the stick, and many won't have the scales fall like Peter did to get who Jesus really is. But it won't be for the want of hearing about it.

Let's open our mouths. I wonder whether we've become a bit too settled with this being a nuanced, subtle thing about 'waiting for the right opportunity to just sow a little seed,' and whether we might not just be better saying to our friends and families over a coffee, 'Look, could I tell you about Jesus? He's the biggest thing in my life and I want to share Him with you.'

I wouldn't do that with a complete stranger (although there are churches in Inverness doing that this month, on the street). But those that you know you're sent to - friends at the school gate, colleagues at work, neighbours in the village - let's actually open our mouths about Jesus to them!

After all, Jesus didn't send His followers to 'listen carefully for the right opportunity and discern when the Spirit might be prompting you to say

something subtle that might move them just a little bit nearer a readiness to hear more another day possibly from you but possibly not...'

Jesus sent them to '*preach* the Kingdom of God!' To '*proclaim*' it! To put it out there and see what response they got! To just lay it out, 'Our lives are infinitely fuller because of Jesus and we'd love you to have that too' and see whether people want to ask what you mean or move onto the weather. Either way, if we're people that are doing that in our communities, Jesus will become a topic of conversation, as we all open our mouths to be Jesus-speaking people.

How would you 'proclaim' Jesus in a one line invitation to a conversation?

(Let me know if you do it!)

Here's the great thing about Jesus telling us to open our mouths - we don't need any resources for that - we can just go out and get on with it! In fact in v.3, Jesus specifically tells His followers not to waste time getting any of these things together - staff, bag, bread, money, tunic. They didn't need any of that *stuff*. They just needed to go and speak to people about Jesus.

So here's where we are in our church's story - there's one church building about to close. And there's another that only exists on those sheets of paper over there. We don't have the buildings we'd like to, and of the ones we do we're going to lose one more. And we don't have lots of money. We don't have lots of people.

But what we do have is far more useful than what we don't have! Jesus sent His followers out with His power and authority v.1 tells us, and we're told the same in Matthew 28 in the Great Commission. As we're sent to proclaim Jesus to the people around us, we do it in His enabling strength. The Spirit of God is given to every one of us following Jesus, not least for this mission. What I wonder is, do we really believe that? Will we open our mouths as if we believe our God is big enough to enable us to speak of Him?

Speaking of resources, that's the next thing I think God wants to speak to us about. I think God's telling us to open our wallets. I'm kind of done with being shy and polite about this, thinking that it's an awkward thing to ask the church to give money. Lots of you give, and give really generously. But particularly when it comes to giving for the new building at Dores Road, I've heard from a few households of a hesitancy about giving to this.

Now, hear me right, because I'm not trying to contradict myself in saying we need to give towards the building. We don't *need* the building to be church, and to be getting on with the mission of proclaiming Jesus to our communities. I think the real question is, do we believe that God *wants* us to build this building? And do we believe that enough to give towards it?

In vv.10-17, the part of the passage describing the feeding of a community of 10,000, this is what happens - all the people turn up in one place, in this case because they're all interested in Jesus. But there's nothing to feed and sustain them. There's no hospitality available for them. It can't be done, it's an impossible task for the small band of disciples to provide it.

So their answer, in v.12, is to suggest to Jesus, 'Send the crowd away to sort themselves out; to provide for themselves.' 'You give them something to eat,' He replies in v.13. They're astonished. It's a ridiculous, impossible command. They don't have anything *like* enough food there, or money to pay for more. Let's have a look at John's version of this in John 6:5-9...

'When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming towards Him, He said to Philip, 'Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?' He asked this only to test him, for He already had in mind what He was going to do. Philip answered Him, 'Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!' Another of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, 'Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?'

That was a different posture from the impossibility mentality. It was a generosity mentality. Where the other disciples saw the maths didn't anywhere near add up, so there was no point obeying, Andrew gathered what they did have - as much as they *could* offer - and wondered with a frown, 'But what can be done with this, Jesus?'

The boy was different again. I think, as he was a child, that it was as simple as this: He heard Jesus say, 'You give them something to eat,' and he just... gave Jesus something for them to eat. He just took what he did have and gave it, without a second thought about how it would work. That, of course, was up to Jesus. The boy was just living generously, as Jesus told them to.

And you know what happened when they put into Jesus' hands what they did have, right? 10,000 full tummies and 12 basketfuls of leftovers. Something like what's going to happen at Ian and Fiona's house this afternoon! Make no mistake, it was a miracle - this *could not* happen except that Jesus made a

way from the little that *could* be given. But it happened when His followers learned to give Him all that they could to bring the blessing to the crowd, and believe that Jesus would do the rest.

Here's our situation in Slackbuie, Ness-side, Ness Castle and Dores - all the people are turning up in one place, and in this case most of them are completely *disinterested* in Jesus. But there's nothing to feed and sustain them. There's no hospitality available for them. It can't be done, it's an impossible task for the small band of disciples to provide it.

Now I've said this before to the St Columba part of this church, but I'll say it again to you all - The new building at Dores Road will cost £2million. We hopefully have the first million - but how do three small churches raise the other million?!? Here's the conviction I'm repeating and others here have affirmed as they've heard from God about it -

God will provide all the money that is needed. It will all come, we just need to ask Him for that. And He'll do it when we ALL give towards the building. It's not that the sum total of what we give is going to be £1million. There's going to be some miracle about this for which we can give glory and thanks to God alone.

But many of us need to open up our wallets. Some of us have hesitated, and I wonder why. Is it because we think there's no point giving the ten pounds, the hundred pounds, the thousand pounds we might give, because that's a drop in the ocean? Is it because we think there's no point giving the £10,000 we might give, because even *that's* just a drop in the ocean? I truly hope it's not because any of us are hoping it will all come from everybody else's wallets and not ours...

'*You give them something to eat.*' It's an invitation to give the little we have, as fully as we can, and let Jesus do the amazing thing with it that stirs Jesus-talk in our communities again. Don't hold back from giving because the maths doesn't add up. That's not an obstacle for our God, and we need to give to this like we believe that. To open our wallets like we believe our God is big enough to provide more than enough on top.

The only other reason I can see for people holding back from giving to this is around this question I think: Is God telling us, 'You give them this building'? Do we believe that God wants us, His people, to provide a place for people to come and be nourished in life in order to go and be fruitful in life? Do we believe that He wants us to provide a community space for the new housing

in Ness-side, Ness Castle and Slackbuie as well as Dores in what I know gets called 'Dores Community Corner'?

That's not a rhetorical question. I'm genuinely asking you, as we all gather as a church, whether God is really leading us to do this. I believe He is, to the point that Heather and I have given and given as much as we can.

And I want to suggest that just now, we pray quietly asking God to lead us about it. And if God affirms this to us, as we gather today - 'you give them this building' - then let's give. All of us. All we can. And as we put that in Jesus' hands as our act of worship to Him and hospitality to our communities, let's watch expectantly to see what He does with it.

Prayer - 'God, do you want us to build this building?'

So God's telling us to open our mouths, and to open our wallets. To be Jesus-speaking, generous people. The final thing I think God's telling us might be the most important shift for us to make. God's telling us to open our homes.

It was in people's homes that the good news was made known in Jesus-talk and generosity. In v.4, Jesus tells His disciples on their mission to stay in the houses that they enter. What Jesus is picturing isn't inviting people into a temple, it's going round to people's houses (where all the best conversations happen) and see who's up for letting you talk about Jesus at their place. In 10:5-8, when Jesus repeats the mission with 70 others, He tells them to stay in the houses that welcome them, and receive *their* generosity.

The good news gets shared with people in Jesus-talk and hospitality - and it's both giving *and* receiving hospitality in people's homes where it happens. Let's learn to let others have us at their house, and talk Jesus with them when we do, if they're up for it. Flick back to Luke 5:27-29, and we read about the flip side of this - giving hospitality to others in our own homes:

'After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. 'Follow me,' Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed Him. Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them.'

So, Levi becomes a Christian. Jesus says, 'Follow me' and Levi drops everything to do that. That's a Christian. So what does he do because of that? He throws a party at his house. Let's have a look at who he has round.

Well, there's Jesus. He literally invited Jesus into his home. And that's an invitation that Jesus *always* accepts in the gospels, and *always* accepts when people make it today, too. Along with Jesus, there's His other followers. As Levi invites Jesus in to his home, he invites the family of followers too.

Now, I wonder what your Sunday lunches or dinner parties look like - typically, it stops here - a bunch of Christians and the very welcome presence of Jesus as we gather to eat and drink together. But Levi's not done with his invitations yet.

v.29 - '...a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them.' Remember, Levi was a tax collector. This was him having his colleagues round, *alongside* his new church family, desiring that they could all experience the presence of Jesus together, and have a really good time doing it. It was a 'great banquet' v.29 says.

This is how good news spreads. It's how the church grew 2000 years ago. It's how it's still growing in other parts of the world. It's actually how churches in Britain are growing in a post-Christendom world where people *are not going to come to a church building just because we hold on to it or build a new one.*

When there is regular Jesus-talk and generosity in people's homes, with a mix of Jesus-followers together with those who don't know what that means yet, *that's* when the gospel spreads like wildfire and takes root in communities.

So how might that affect what we all do as we head into a new year, and a new chapter of our joint church life? It's time to open our homes. If you've got a big home, God probably didn't give that just for you and one or two others. If you don't have a big home, you could team up with others who do. To throw some parties. To have church family round *together* with colleagues, or friends from the school gate, or neighbours from the village. And to experience Jesus-talk and generosity together.

I don't mean that you sit everyone down for a one hour Bible study before pudding, or give everyone a gift hamper on the way out the door. I mean things like I've experienced in our home and some of your homes in recent weeks.

You can bring up what you're hearing from God in church teaching or your own reading. Like when Duncan and I were sharing lunch with someone who doesn't follow Jesus, and we just mentioned a book that Duncan's reading just now about why men don't go to church, and it opened up a great conversation.

Or when we were at the Gunns house the last time there was a walk and waffles missional community gathering, and a friend we all know from school came along and the look on her face echoed her repeated words about just how welcome and included she felt, and she started talking about her experience of church and faith without any prompting at all.

It's in these times, where food is lavished and where we look after people's kids for them and give them a break, and where generosity is experienced in that mixed community of Christians and others that the gospel comes alive. Where when people naturally share more deeply, we don't just say, 'I'll be praying for you,' but we actually just offer 'Can I pray for you right now about that?', because that's what we do as a community in the presence of Jesus.

Lots of you have heard me talk about 'missional communities' before, and it's felt like a hard thing to flesh out, or something to write off because we're not in a big city where dozens of people gather together for the same activity. But whether you've heard me use the phrase a hundred times or this is the first you're hearing of it, let me make this much more simple:

A missional community is a gathering of both those following Jesus and those who aren't yet, experiencing Jesus-talk and generosity together. And I think the most natural context for that is just the one we're reading about in Luke, and that the early church majored on too - opening our homes for it to happen there around lots of food and drink.

So, thanks to Ian and Fiona Bateman, who are opening their home to us today, we can have a go at this. There will be lots of people gathered as community. There will be lots of food. There will be at least one tax collector. (Reformed... I mean, retired!) So can I encourage us to use this time to practice what we're going to do in our town and villages?

This afternoon, let's have Jesus-talk. Let's share with each other what God's been saying to us, teaching us. We can ask each other that and tell each other that. Let's demonstrate generosity and open-handedness to each other - in serving and clearing and washing up and looking after the kids and offering lifts and whatever other ways you can see.

I'd love to tell you that the agenda for this year is far less meetings and far more parties. So here's how it'll work. If you throw enough parties for people like this, the churches will grow so much that we won't have time for what my kids call VBMs (Very Boring Meetings). So there's an incentive for you...

All of this - opening our mouths, opening our wallets, opening our homes - I think is going to take a significant shift in our minds, attitudes, use of diaries and lots more. So as we close, I invite you to pray again quietly...

God, what do you want me to change? Will you speak to me, Holy Spirit, and light up in me what you want to say?