

The last word

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Close the distance, not the gate

Assessing the times, the Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison asks this question: "Why should we want to know a stranger when it is easier to estrange another? Why should we want to close the distance when we can close the gate?" Except this isn't a question, it's a judgment.

It's a negative judgment on both our society and our churches. Where are our hearts really at? Are we trying more to close the distance between us and what's foreign, or are we into closing gates to keep strangers estranged?

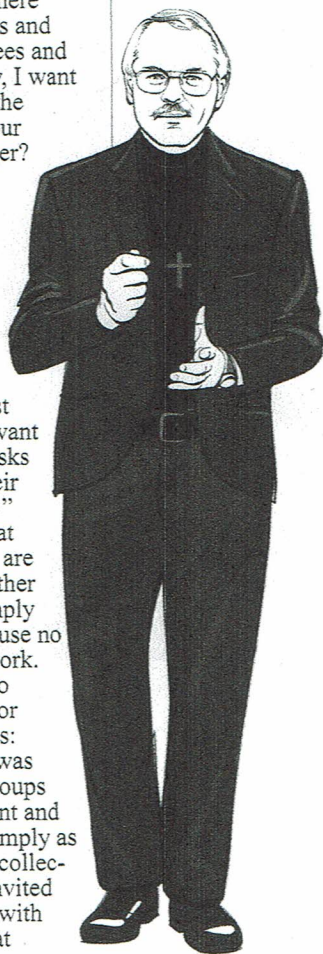
In fairness, it might be pointed out that this has always been a struggle. There hasn't been a golden age when people wholeheartedly welcomed the stranger. There have been golden individuals and even golden communities who were welcoming, but never society or church as a whole.

Much as this issue is so front and centre in our politics today, as countries everywhere struggle with their immigration policies and with what to do with millions of refugees and migrants wanting to enter their country, I want to take Morrison's challenge, to close the distance rather than close the gate, to our churches. Are we inviting in the stranger? Or are we content to let the estranged remain outside?

There is a challenging motif within Jesus's parable of the over-generous vineyard owner which can easily be missed because of the overall lesson within the story. It concerns the question that the vineyard owner asks the last group of workers, those who will work for only one hour. Unlike the first group, he doesn't ask them: "Do you want to work in my vineyard?" Rather, he asks them: "Why aren't you working?" Their answer: "Because no one has hired us!" Notice they don't answer by saying that their non-employment is because they are lazy, incompetent or uninterested. Neither does the vineyard owner's question imply that. They aren't working simply because no one has given them the invitation to work.

Sadly, I believe this is the case for so many people who are seemingly cold or indifferent to religion and our churches: nobody has invited them in. And that was true too at the time of Jesus. Whole groups of people were seen as being indifferent and hostile to religion and were deemed simply as sinners. This included prostitutes, tax collectors, foreigners and criminals. Jesus invited them in and many of them responded with a sincerity, contrition and devotion that

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shamed those who considered themselves true believers. For the so-called sinners, all that stood between them and entry into the kingdom was a genuine invitation.

Why aren't you practising a faith? No one has invited us!

Just in my own, admittedly limited, pastoral experience, I have seen a number of individuals who from childhood to early or late mid-life were indifferent to, and even somewhat paranoid about, religion and church. It was a world from which they had always felt excluded. But, thanks to some gracious person or fortunate circumstance, at a certain moment they felt invited in and they gave themselves over to their new religious family with a disarming warmth, fervour and gratitude, often taking a fierce pride in their new identity. Witnessing this several times, I now understand why the prostitutes and tax collectors, more than the Church people at the time, believed in Jesus. He was the first religious person to truly invite them in.

Sadly, too, there's a reverse side to this where, all too often, in all religious sincerity, we not only don't invite certain others in, we positively close the gates on them. We see that a number of times in the Gospels where, for example, those around Jesus block others from having access to him, as is the case in that rather colourful story where some people are trying to bring a paralytic to Jesus but are blocked by the crowds surrounding him and consequently have to make a hole in the roof in order to lower the paralytic into his presence.

Too frequently, unknowingly, sincerely, but blindly, we are that crowd around Jesus, blocking access to him by our presence. This is an occupational danger, especially for all of us who are in ministry. We so easily, in all sincerity, in the name of Christ, in the name of orthodox theology, and in the name of sound pastoral practice, set ourselves up as gatekeepers, as guardians of our churches, through whom others must pass in order to have access to God. We need more clearly to remember that Christ is the gatekeeper, and the only gatekeeper, and we need to refresh ourselves on what that means by looking at why Jesus chased the money changers out of the temple in John's Gospel. They, the money changers, had set themselves up as a medium through which people had to pass in order to offer worship to God. Jesus would have none of it.

Our mission as disciples of Jesus is not to be gatekeepers. We need instead to work at closing the distance rather than closing the gate.

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