

Revelation 3:8 Going through the door

Introduction

Our text for 2013 is taken from Revelation 3:8: *See I have placed before you an open door that no-one can shut.* Normally I have a verse in mind for the following year, a few weeks sooner than this year. I was very conscious that 2013 is a most significant year ahead of us and was praying that the Lord would give me clear guidance about the verse for this year. I am thankful that it was raised at a deacons' meeting a few months ago, but also it was clearly a verse on the hearts of other people in the congregation, including the day before I made the choice when someone gave me an envelope with Scriptures they felt the Lord had for us as a congregation at this time. This verse was at the top of the list as I opened that envelope. It was for me a confirmation of the rightness of the relationships we have been developing over the last six months, that it was not just something some of us felt was the right way to go, but that God was in it, that He was prompting us to go forward into the new future He has prepared for us. *See I have placed before you an open door that no-one can shut.* Are you willing to walk by faith into the future He has for us both individually and collectively in 2013? There have been times of major decisions in previous decades in this church and big steps have been taken that have resulted in changes, but God has honoured us as we have gone forward with Him at those crucial times. Now in our time, in this generation, we have the responsibility as God's people to go forward in the light of His revealed will to us. There are always more questions we would like to have answered; always more information we would like to find out, but I believe that as we take the next step of faith He will reveal more of His good and perfect will to us about our future work and witness in Broughty Ferry. Our verse for the year comes from a letter to one of the seven churches in Western Turkey towards the end of the first century AD. What message did Jesus give to that congregation? And what message through this letter, do I believe He wants us to hear at the start of this New Year?

1. The background of the city and church in Philadelphia

Philadelphia was the youngest of the seven cities of Asia. It had been planted by settlers from Pergamum between 159 and 138BC. Its location was intentional on the border of three regions of Asia Minor, the provinces of Mysia, Lydia and Phrygia. The purpose of its creation was to serve as a **missionary presence** promoting Greek culture and language to the people of Lydia and Phrygia. Prior to the creation of Philadelphia each of these regions spoke their own language and had their own distinctive culture. By 19AD the Lydians had lost their own language and culture and were simply another part of the Greek-speaking world. By peaceful means of influencing their neighbours the linguistic and cultural missionaries of Philadelphia had succeeded at the task entrusted to them. The risen Lord Jesus Christ was inviting the Christians of this city to engage in a similar missionary work, but in this case in His name and to spread the Christian faith. Would they accept Jesus' offer and take up this challenge? Philadelphia was around twenty-eight miles south-east of Sardis, in the fertile region of Lydia, erected on a great volcanic plain that had extremely fertile soil for the many vineyards which flourished there producing a significant quantity of high-quality wine for the Roman Empire. Yet earth tremors were frequent usually minor, but occasionally serious like the earthquake that devastated the town in AD17. Although the town was rebuilt the regular minor shocks kept on reminding the population that without warning one day another major quake could devastate their community once again. Roman Emperors had been generous in funding the rebuilding of the city. After the gifts from Emperor Tiberius it changed its name to Neocaesarea (new city of Caesar); Later in the time of Vespasian towards the end of the

first century AD another name change was made in acknowledgement of his goodness to the community and for a short time it was called Flavia (Vespasian's family name). However, by the time of writing of this letter the original name had been restored, but the citizens of this city knew a lot about the receiving of a *new name* (Rev.3:12). This small congregation is one that Jesus wanted to praise and encourage to keep their eyes fixed on Him. Six centuries later Islam came flooding into Turkey and many other cities succumbed to its influence. However, Philadelphia stood alone as the last bastion of the Christian faith, remaining a free Greek Christian city amongst a people of other religious beliefs. It was as late as the mid-fourteenth century AD when the city got taken over by a Muslim majority, though a Christian Church remained into the twentieth century –only Smyrna of the other six cities could claim a similarly faithful Christian witness. Praise God for what this little congregation accomplished for the Lord over two millennia. What did Jesus say to them? Notice this small city was planted in a new area to be a missionary presence to change that region in the cause of the Greek language and culture – evangelism is the word that best describes their secular calling. We are prayerfully considering union with another congregation and the potential establishment of a new stronger witness in an under-churched area of this town. Our calling in the best Christian sense –if this goes ahead is to be a missionary presence sharing the good news of the Christian Gospel. Our motivation is not primarily about new larger premises or easier car-parking or similar issues- it must be, and must always be, because we have the conviction that through this venture we can reach more people with the good news of Jesus and that we can have a greater impact on the wider community than by not making this choice. I believe that the Lord is saying to us at this time in the words of our verse for the year: Revelation 3:8: *See I have placed before you an open door that no-one can shut*. What message did Jesus give to that small Christian congregation –and by implication what could He be saying to us through this Letter to the Church at Philadelphia?

2. What has He promised to give them? (Revelation 3:7-8) *an open door...*

"To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: 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.

(a)The Description of the One who gives the promise (Rev.3:7) *Him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. The Key of David* (v7) This phrase is in connection with the character of Jesus, who is also described as 'holy'; see I Peter 1:16 *For the Scriptures say, You must be holy because I am holy; and true; I am... the truth* (John 14:6). The 'key of David' comes from the Old Testament and refers to Eliakim chief official in Hezekiah's government who was delegated the authority to negotiate with the Assyrians who were threatening the country in the 8th century BC. Isaiah 22:20-22 S states: *And then I will call My servant Eliakim son of Hilkiah to replace you. 21 He will have your royal robes, your title, and your authority. And he will be a father to the people of Jerusalem and Judah. 22 I will give him the key to the house of David--the highest position in the royal court. He **will open doors, and no one will be able to shut them**; he will close doors, and no one will be able to open them;* (II Kings 18:18 refers to Eliakim as *the palace administrator*). Jesus has full authority from the King of Kings, God Himself, to lead and direct His people. His authority was passed on to His church symbolically through Peter, (Matthew 16:19 *And I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever you lock [bind] on earth will already have been locked [bound] in heaven, and whatever you open [loose] on earth will already have been opened [loosed] in heaven.*), who led the way in preaching the gospel successively to Jews, Samaritans, then Gentiles in the Acts of the Apostles. At particular times in history God gives opportunities for particular men and women to step forward in faith and accomplish great things for Him, sometimes in their nations; sometimes in their

regions, on other occasions within their local communities. Could this be our calling and our time in the community in which He has placed us; has He given us the ‘open door’ to accomplish the work that has been on our hearts for some years for larger and more suitable premises to reach a greater number of people with the good news of the gospel? I believe that He has done that. Notice that the Church at Philadelphia was numerically small and limited in its material resources, but the Lord had granted them the privilege and responsibility to carry out this work for Him. What they would accomplish over more than a thousand years was probably greater than that of any other Christian congregation in Western Turkey. The question in the late first century AD was this- would they rise up to the challenge Jesus had placed before them? Would they accept the opportunity to go forward while the door was open? Opportunities do not last forever. Will we take the opportunity presented to us, for which we have prayed for a good number of years? I believe that the Lord is saying to us very clearly at the start of this New Year these words from Revelation 3:8: *See I have placed before you an open door that no-one can shut.*

(b) **The Ministry of Jesus** *What He opens no one can shut, and what He shuts no one can open* (Rev.3:7). Jesus’ words in Matthew’s Gospel concerning the Great Commission to His followers point us to the invitation we have received from our Commander in Chief to serve Him and live for Him by taking His wonderful gospel to people who need what He has already obtained for them on the cross. *Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."* (Matthew 28:18-20). The opportunity He has given us is not for our benefit but for the people who need to hear of God’s love for them and to see it demonstrated through our service of them in the years to come. It will be costly not just in financial terms, but in terms of priorities that this is not about us but God getting glory through the salvation of people who need Him who have yet to come to faith in Him. When we grasp that ultimately it is not about my personal comfort or preferences but what most honours His name and enables us more effectively to fulfil the Great Commission then it provides a grid reference to sift through the competing priorities that will face us –assuming a decision for union is accomplished in the near future. The imagery of an open door or gate is common in Scripture to refer to an opportunity for (i) **Salvation** See John 10:9 *I am the door [gate NIV]. If anyone enters by Me he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture* (NKJV); Matthew 7:13-14 *You can enter God’s kingdom only by the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it.* A particular Afghan man came to faith in Christ while working with Christians who were helping his fellow displaced Afghans in another country. After a few years in that community he spent a number of years in another part of the world. His problems began when he went home to his native country and sought to reclaim his teenage daughters from his parents who had looked after them in his absence. Due to his Christian faith his father declined to hand the girls over and reported him to the police as a convert to Christianity. A few years ago he was put on trial for his life –it is a lonely situation- all previous people on trial retracted their profession of faith when faced with the death penalty in Afghanistan, except this man who was prepared to die rather than deny Jesus. Salvation for a former Muslim is anything but cheap grace – we have it so easy, do we value our salvation? This image is also used in Scripture to point to an opportunity for various forms of ministry in Jesus’ name. (ii) **Service** ‘SS’ ‘saved to serve’ is the Salvation Army motto; James 2:17 states: *So you see, faith by itself isn’t enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.* On the third of Paul’s missionary journeys, he spent three years in Ephesus sharing his faith in a variety of ways including lecturing in a hired hall and visiting people in their own homes.

He told the Corinthian Church in a letter how he viewed that situation. I Corinthians 16:9 recorded: *There is a wide open door for a great work here, although many oppose me*; likewise a little later when Paul was in Rome for more than two years and held under house arrest in his own rented home, he had an unexpected number of both Jews and Gentiles who came to see him to discuss the Christian faith, including a runaway slave called Onesimus. However, despite all these opportunities to live out his faith Paul asked the Christians in Colossae to pray that God would provide more opportunities for his witness for Christ... *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.* ⁴*Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should* (Colossians 4:3-4); Remember at the end of the first missionary journey the words Paul and Barnabas used to refer to the success of their mission in Cyprus and Turkey in Acts 14:27: Upon arriving in Antioch, *they called the church together and reported everything God had done through them and how He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles, too.* This was a relatively small church in Philadelphia, but Jesus wanted to encourage them to recognise that He would strengthen them to do all He had called them to do. Most importantly that He would provide opportunities for them to witness for Him. The challenge for us is this: what open doors has Jesus provided for you and for me? and for us as a congregation? As we step out in faith He will open more doors for us. I believe that happened at Christmas with the opportunity for our praise band in the Ferry; also with some of the contacts made in preparation for the Panmurefield Carol Service. We do not see the harvest all at once, but as we sow the seed of the Gospel by faith He will give the harvest in the years to come. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to guide and direct us in discerning what He is saying to us in this situation and to lead us forward at this crucial time.

3. What did he acknowledge would be the cost of obedience? (Revelation 3:9-10)

(a) **The pain caused by opposition** (Rev.3:9) *I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.* The words of verse nine come partly from a quotation from Isaiah 60:14 relating in its context to the Jews, the people of God in the Old Testament (*The sons of your oppressors will come bowing before you; all who despise you will bow down at your feet and will call you the City of the Lord, Zion of the Holy One of Israel*), but now applicable also to the church of Jesus Christ comprised of believing Jews and Gentles. In its Old Testament context the quotation from Isaiah related to the blessing that would be experienced by God's people after having come through several traumatic experiences of horrific warfare; exile from their homeland and a loss of everything they were familiar with, yet God would be faithful to them and bring them back to a time of blessing and encouragement when their enemies would either be no more or would have become friends with them (Cyrus the Persian Emperor, for example (Isaiah 44:28-45:4). The most implacable people who oppose God's work and the most painful times in ministry for many Christians comes from religious people who want a token bit of religion, but not a life-changing commitment. Opposition from militant Muslims and the horrific persecution that is a regular experience in many Muslim countries today is no surprise. Even that from atheistic fundamentalists whose lives appear to be dedicated to speaking about what they don't believe in, should be expected. What hurts most of all, though, is the heartache caused as a result of the problems that arise from opposition from religious people, including some clerics, who do not appear to have a personal relationship with Jesus and who ridicule those that want to take our faith seriously. Nothing has changed from Jesus' day. It was not the pagans, the agnostics or the adherents of other faiths that organised the crucifixion of Jesus. It was the leading Sadducees who ran the Jerusalem Temple, the religious establishment, together with some of the Pharisees, who wanted Jesus out of the way. The divide between the Jews who

acknowledged Jesus as Messiah and the majority who didn't in the Holy Land widened to an unbridgeable chasm after the followers of Jesus refused to get involved in the war against the Romans (66-70AD). It was a traumatic time for the nation with so many Jews killed, or exiled and sold into slavery that its impact at that time was as defining a moment as the holocaust was for them in the twentieth century AD. The Jewish followers of Jesus wanted to maintain their Jewish identity as well as their Christian faith, but increasingly that became impossible. This condemnation of the Jews in Philadelphia (Rev.3:9) *those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars...* appears incredibly strong. There is a lot of information that we do not have that might have helped us understand the situation better. However, it appears certain that the Christian Church in Philadelphia had a difficult relationship with the Jewish community in that city into the second century AD (See Ignatius, 'Letter to the Church at Philadelphia 6:1' easily accessible on the internet). Even more significantly the Jewish Talmud (*b. Shabbat 147b*, quoted by GH. Beale, *Revelation*, p.287), a book describing Jewish theology and practice in the couple of centuries before and after the time of Jesus, appeared to imply that the Jews of Philadelphia had compromised their faith by participating in the religious practices of the pagan trades guilds and even, though not required to, participating in emperor worship ceremonies! It was possible in the light of the teaching of Orthodox Judaism to call into question the claim of the Philadelphia Jewish community to be genuinely practising Jews. If this is a correct reading of that text then it would be a helpful insight into Jesus' strength of feeling re that particular faith community in Philadelphia. It is so ironic that it was those Jews who made life so hard for the Jews who believed in Jesus in that city. Were the persecutors hoping to impress other Jews with their 'orthodoxy' by oppressing the Christians? Human motivation can be so mixed, but God knows all these things and especially when problems admit of no human resolution we have to leave them in His hands. We need to acknowledge too that going forward with God's work will see opposition and difficulties. There will be discouragements and setbacks, but they will not be conclusive –with God's help we will overcome them.

(b) **The assurance given by Jesus** (Rev.3:10) *Since you have kept My command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. ¹¹I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.* We are all sinful people. Within the ranks of even Evangelical Churches there can be conflicts and divisions that can be exceedingly painful and hard to resolve. This is the devil's greatest triumph when genuine Christians are in conflict with one another. There are times of genuine differences of opinions which are not easy to resolve. Maintaining *the unity of the Spirit* (Ephesians 4:3) in a local church is the test of our spiritual maturity. The Lord who has enabled us to go forward in past years united, despite some differences of opinion in times of change can and will do so again in the years to come. How much we need brothers and sisters in Christ with godly discernment who can serve as ministers of reconciliation in such conflicts. Most of the time it involves one to one relationships; the Matthew 18:15-18 procedure for resolving problems must be followed in such circumstances. There are other situations where the complexity of issues makes it very hard to know how to resolve them. You need a sense of humour, together with a spiritual backbone to serve the Lord! These Philadelphian Christians showed the uncommon grace of perseverance in their lives which greatly pleased the Lord. May we also show this spiritual attribute in our lives in the remaining years He entrusts to us. Can Jesus trust you and me to keep our focus on the most important tasks of mission and ministry as we go forward together into the future He has for us in the year ahead?

4. What did Jesus promise for the future? (Revelation 3:11-13) *I am coming...your crown*

¹¹*I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.*¹²*Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of My God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from My God; and I will also write on him My new name.* ¹³*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.* We remember that Philadelphia was a geologically unstable place with regular earth tremors. Yet In this unstable place Jesus calls for His people to be spiritually 'as solid as a rock'! We live in a world of fluctuating moral fashions and values. Trees with strong deep roots can stand tall in the strongest winds. Spiritually healthy Christians whose regular fellowship with the Lord enables them to gain nourishment from Him will be able to endure the pressures of life that come our way with His strength. Psalm 1 is a helpful psalm for meditation and reflection on this theme. *Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers.* ² *But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.* ³ *He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.* ⁴ *Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away.* ⁵ *Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous,* ⁶ *for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.* The clear image in Revelation 3:11-13 on this theme of stability is found in verse twelve: **a pillar in the temple of My God.** Paul used a similar expression in his first letter to Timothy *I am writing these things to you now, even though I hope to be with you soon,* ¹⁵ *so that if I can't come for a while, you will know how people must conduct themselves in the household of God. This is the church of the living God, which is **the pillar and support of the truth*** (I Timothy 3:14-15). Can God count on you and me to be people of faith, pillars of truth and practice who will seize the opportunities for mission and ministry in the New Year just begun? I trust we will for His name's sake, Amen.