

# KING FOR EVER

JAMES S. STEWART

*"The Lord sat as King at the flood;  
yea, the Lord sitteth King for ever."—THE PSALMIST*



ABINGDON  
Nashville

1975

# CHRIST AT THE DOOR

*"Behold, I stand at the door, and knock:  
if any man hear My voice, and open the door, I will come in to him,  
and will sup with him, and he with Me."*

REVELATION 3:20

Beethoven's fifth symphony, the great C minor, is built up around a single phrase of music, now known throughout the world. It is a sequence of four notes only—one short note three times repeated, followed immediately by a longer note lower down the scale—and this dominating phrase, appearing and reappearing from the first bar of the symphony to the last, helps to give the music its rugged rhythm and momentum. During the Second World War, it was this phrase which became the secret V sign for conquered Europe. Tradition has not been slow to tell us what that haunting four-note sequence represents. "Thus fate knocks at the door" is said to have been Beethoven's own account of it. Whether that interpretation really tallies with the composer's inmost mind is perhaps doubtful. But certain it is that those sudden dramatic opening notes, repeated and re-echoed all the way through, do convey with extraordinary vividness an imperious tap, rap at a closed gate, an inexorable, peremptory summons to draw back the bolts and stand and deliver.

"Thus fate knocks at the door." But what is fate? Some there are who, looking out upon the mystery of this strange life where we seem driven this way and that by forces beyond our control, speak of fate, others call it God. Where the fatalist can hear only the remorseless rhythm of the march of history, pounding out its ominous refrain, the Christian hears the living

KING FOR EVER

124

voice of the eternal. "*Behold, I stand at the door, and knock.*" Apply this to the present time. Above the tumult and the shouting of contemporary history with all its hectic rivalry of contradictory ideologies, and through the deafening clamor and chaos of this confused, bewildered age, there comes—if you will hear it—a deeper sound, clear, penetrating, unmistakable—not fate, but God, knocking at the door.

I sometimes wonder if we Christians are alert enough to hear it. It is perhaps significant that the word used in the original Greek does not mean a gentle tap: it is the word for knocking with a staff. Walter de la Mare has a poem describing a horse-man knocking at the door of a lonely house in the depths of the forest, with no response from the phantom listeners within.

For he suddenly snore on the door, even

Louder, and lifted his head:—

"Tell them I came, and no one answered,

That I kept my word," he said.

And indeed in our generation God has kept his word. There has been through these years a sound—not the hand of fate, but the hand of God, knocking at the door.

For consider this. Here is this twentieth century civilization trying hurriedly to readjust its ways of life to the startling, incredible leap forward of scientific knowledge; this generation which has seen so many romantic illusions of human brotherhood and peace go whistling down the wind, and so much utopian optimism shattered into fragments; this world that is beginning to realize it may be easier to send an astronaut to the moon than to rescue an alcoholic or a drug addict, easier and possibly less important to fling men into space than to teach them to walk with dignity and humility on earth. Here is this world that is beginning at last to sense the disquieting truth (which indeed Jesus and the gospel have always proclaimed) that man left to himself is fundamentally incapable of resolving the problem of his destiny. Left to himself he will never make this earth a paradise of peace, fraternity, and security. And what is all that discovery—that bad news about man—but a prepara-

CHRIST AT THE DOOR

125

tion for the good news about God? What is that disillusionment and frustration, that sense of the need of another and a greater power to come and take control—what is that, but God knocking at the door?

Lord God of hosts, be with us yet,  
Lest we forget—lest we forget!

So in our own lives too. Life today is not particularly kind to the Christian values and the spiritual vision. There are thronging incessant cares and distractions that clamp us down to earth and crowd the angels out. But moments do come when something sits within us—a memory perhaps of a mother's prayers from years of long ago, a glimpse of strange compelling beauty in the sky, some words of an old hymn, or perhaps it may be the sudden spectacle of glaring social injustice, some hateful wrong that demands a remedy, and with that, the nobler mood comes back and takes control. And what is that experience, but just God knocking at the door?

Robert Browning, with his profound spiritual perception, knew how impervious we human creatures can become to higher influence, how secure and settled in our materialist ways. But he noted also this, that

Just when we are safest, there's a sunset-touch,  
A fancy from a flower-bell, some one's death,  
A chorus-ending from Euripides, —  
And that's enough for fifty hopes and fears  
As old and new at once as Nature's self  
To rap and knock and enter in our soul.

And what is that but God knocking at the door?

Carry the argument a stage further, and you come to this—even in the inmost citadel of self and sin no man is finally safe. There is conscience, there is remorse, there is the experience of encountering down the road of final apostasy the reproachful face of Jesus. There is the discovery that a man cannot sin and get away with it. And what is that discovery, that encounter, that remorse—but God knocking at the door?

KING FOR EVER

126

You will remember a place where Shakespeare with overwhelming dramatic force drives this truth home. After Macbeth's dreadful deed was accomplished:

Methought I heard a voice cry, Sleep no more!  
Macbeth doth murder sleep,—

and then suddenly, at the point of unbearable tension, comes the sound of knocking within:

Whence is that knocking?  
How is't with me, when every noise appals me?  
What hands are here?

But it comes again and again and yet again until the man's nerves cannot stand it, and crying wildly:

Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst! he turns and rushes away.

Indeed Browning was right. "Just when we are safest, a sunset-touch—and that's enough." God raps and knocks and enters in the soul.

Today is the Lord's day, and we are gathered here in his House for worship. I do not know what worship ever means if it does not mean the eternal world signaling to us, beckoning to us, knocking at our door. For what God does in this act of worship is not only to withdraw us temporarily from the clamor and the turmoil of the world. It is to take the cross and the resurrection of Jesus and thrust them into the very center of our vision—that haunting, disturbing, challenging cross, that glorious, world-shattering, new-creating resurrection. And if there should be someone here who has been going through a lean and difficult time recently, with work and worry taking toll—losing interest in prayer and worship and the house of God, and feeling far off from spiritual things—nevertheless, you are here, and Christ is here, the cross on which he died for love of you is here, and the resurrection which makes him your living Contemporary is here. So it is that this hour's worship can be God knocking at the door.

CHRIST AT THE DOOR

127

"Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man bear my voice." So apparently it is not inevitable. If the man within hears—well and good. But if he does not, what then? I may know the mood of restlessness, a haunting dissatisfaction with the way my life has been going: but do I recognize that experience for what in fact it is, the voice of Christ to me? Or do I perhaps explain it away? "Oh, it is just weakness and sentiment, mere psychological suggestion." This is the question. When I am visited with compunction over the wrongs of society or the inner defeats of my own life, do I say to myself "You are a fool to worry"? Or do I say, "This is God. This is the Lord speaking to me in judgment and in mercy"?

For that is the truth. And it is precisely at this point that the Lord's day and the house of worship come to help us. They enable us to make a silence and a space within our crowded, jostled lives, so that the still small voice may have a chance and may reveal itself as the very voice of our Redeemer.

"Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, *and open the door.*" So apparently that is not inevitable either. If the man within, having heard, chooses to open! But if he does not—what then? "I will not force the door," says Jesus. "I will not compel any man's allegiance. Until he chooses to open, I stand and wait."

Mark you, I am not saying anything at the moment about what may happen if the man inside wants to open, wants to be a disciple of this Christ and Master, and discovers that he cannot, finds that for one reason or another the door will just not move. That is different. I hope to say a word about that at the end. But the point just now is this: if the man does not wish to open, has no desire to be committed to discipleship, Christ will not break in. He stands and waits.

This is the sacredness of personality. Even God will not violate it. This is the mystery of free will.

Sometimes we almost wish that Christ would assert himself more forcibly. When you look out on the world and see how often the cause of truth is wrecked on the sheer hidebound

KING FOR EVER

128

inflexibility of stubborn men, God's plan turned down even when it is manifestly the one hope for the nations and the future of mankind, you may well feel like crying "Take action, Christ! Break down that door of dogged self-assertiveness and compel them to obey!"

But it is not Christ's way. Once—yes, once—he was tempted to try it. Once, early in his ministry, came the thought, "Shall I impose my will upon them? Shall I coerce belief? It will be in a good cause to win them for God and salvation." He saw how it could be done. The pinnacle of the temple! A sudden leap from there—the gasp of horror from the onlookers beneath—the shout of amazement at the spectacular miracle that would preserve his life! Surely that would batter down their unbelief and dazzle them into worship. That would burst open the door!

But he rejected it. He would not override man's freedom. He would not burgle the house of personality. They must come to him as sons, not slaves. "If any man open the door!"

Of course this lays an urgent responsibility on us. Here is this world in which we have to live, and here, embedded at the very heart of that world, are certain facts we call the Christian revelation—God incarnate, God in the sacrifice of the cross, God cleaving history asunder by the resurrection. The Christian revelation—this is the situation which urgently demands our response, the mighty act to which with our whole existence we have to say either yes or no. This is the measure of our responsibility.

In other words, if any man open the door, let him do it decisively, and not just a niggardly couple of inches. This was precisely the trouble here at Laodicea, the church to which the words were originally addressed, the community that was "neither cold nor hot," but politely, respectably tepid. Do not equivocate with God, is the message here. Do not muddle your logic and sell your intellectual integrity in that dubious way. Let it be either a plain decisive no, which can at least be understood, or else a ringing yes with all the passion of your being—not a few grudging inches, as when some grumpy, reluctant householder peers round the corner of the door when the bell is rung, glower-

CHRIST AT THE DOOR

129

ing inhospitably and wishing you would begone. Not that. Fling wide the gate! It is the God of your life who is waiting.

Now look at this. We have had these two "ifs": "if any man hear my voice," "if any man open the door," neither of them inevitable. But now there follows, "If any man hear my voice and open the door, *I will come in.*" And this time it is inevitable. "I will come in, and sup with him." It is quite unconditional. And this is the humbling glory of the gospel.

There was once a big-hearted Roman soldier who asked Jesus to come and help him, for his servant was ill. But then second thoughts intervened. "Who am I to receive this Jesus into my house? I am not his kind—I am blunt and ordinary and unspiritual. The place is not fit to receive him. Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof." And ever since that hour these words of his have been taken up in the confession of countless hearts:

I am not worthy; cold and bare

The lodging of my soul;

How canst Thou deign to enter there?

Christ in my shabby, unspiritual life! If only I could have offered him a half-decent faith and hope and love! If only I had time to set the place to rights before he comes—though God knows it might take half a lifetime, there is so much to be done! But, friend, do you not remember? He was born in a stable. "Cold and bare the lodging of my soul." But not more cold and bare than that dark, drafty place at Bethlehem. And do you not remember again? There was a house in Jericho whose threshold no one would willingly cross, because it belonged to a squalid little renegade and traitor and collaborator, but Jesus went to supper with Zacchaeus. "If any man open the door—any man at all—I will come in and sup with him." The inevitability of grace!

Notice, further, the precise form of words—it is very significant. "I will sup with him, *and he with me.*" In other words, the positions are now reversed; the guest becomes the host. It is

KING FOR EVER

130

exactly what happened one night at Emmaus when two of them asked him in to share their meal. He took the bread and broke it for them, and in that instant they knew who he was. So when he comes into your life and mine. He may come as guest, but he remains as host. He means to take control.

Have you thought of that? Are you sure you would like it? To hand over the whole house—your whole self—to him? Get out the keys, the secret keys; will you give up every one to him? You had best think twice, declares the poet, before admitting even a human love into the placid stronghold of your life:

If love should count you worthy, and should deign

One day to seek your door and be your guest,

Pause! ere you draw the bolt and bid him rest,

If in your old content you would remain . . .

He wakes desires you never may forget,

He shows you stars you never saw before.

The whole sonnet might indeed have been written not about human love but about the Lord Jesus Christ. Has he not disturbed our dull, tedious contentment with desires which, once awakened, will haunt us till we die and stars we never saw before he came? It can be a mightily disturbing thing having Christ come in to take control.

He makes you share with Him, for evermore,

The burden of the world's divine regret.

How wise you were to open not! and yet,

How poor if you should turn Him from the door!

But I am conscious that someone may be saying to me, "You have not described my case. You have spoken of the man who will not open his heart to God, and you have spoken of the other who will—the defiant pagan and the faithful Christian. But I am different from both. I want to open, but the door refuses to move. The lock has grown rusty, and I cannot turn the key; the bolts are jammed, and I cannot pull them back. Even if Christ knocks till the house reverberates, I am not able to get that closed door open!"

CHRIST AT THE DOOR

131

Is that the trouble? The rust of prayerless days? The atrophy of faith, the dwindling of spiritual zest, the loss of spiritual power? You want the door to open, but it just will not budge—is that it?

Well, listen. We saw already that Christ never breaks down a door, if the owner does not want to have him in. He will not do it against a man's will. But this is quite different. Here is someone who really wants to open the door and finds himself beaten. But is there not a story in the Gospels of a day when Christ came, "the doors being shut," and stood in the midst and said, "Peace be unto you"? Does that not give a sudden hint of how it might happen even now? Long ago in the Elizabethan age the poet-preacher of St. Paul's Cathedral, Dr. John Donne, had envisaged this precise situation, of the door too firmly jammed to move, and he met it with a prayer:

Barter my heart, three person'd God! for, You  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend  
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new . . . .  
I am betroth'd unto Your enemy,  
Divorce me, unite, or break that knot again,  
Take me to You, imprison me, for I  
Except You enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except You ravish me.

"Barter my heart, three person'd God!" And you can say, if not that, at least something like it. "Lord, here am I. I really want to let you in. But I have so little faith. I have forgotten how to pray. I am such an ordinary, unspiritual creature. I have tried to open the door but, Lord, there is the rust, the accumulated rust of years upon the bolts. You must do it for me. Break through! Smash that rusty lock. Barter my heart, three personed God! And even so—yes, even so—come, Lord Jesus!"

## FACING OUR SKEPTICAL MOODS

*"I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue:  
I will keep my mouth with a bridle . . . Lord, make me to know mine end,  
and the measure of my days, what it is . . . .  
And now, Lord, what wait I for? My hope is in Thee . . . .  
I am a stranger with Thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were.  
O spare me, that I may recover strength,  
before I go hence, and be no more."  
PSALM 39:1-13*

One effect the fierce strains and stresses of these critical days ought to have is to drive the church and all of us back to the psalms. Right down the centuries, to every succeeding generation the psalmists of Israel have spoken, but never surely did their words ring out across the dark with more commanding relevance than in our own confused and stormy day.

Let this Thirty-Ninth Psalm stand as an example. A word first about its structure. It is a poem in four stanzas, the first three stanzas having three verses each, the final stanza four. You will observe that, as you pass from one stanza to the next, the mood changes. The theme develops. The man's reaction to the terrific pressure of life undergoes an exciting transformation.

I propose that we should travel this journey with him, step by step. And I pray that it may be a real word of the Lord, this psalm, to brace and rally us for our own pilgrimage in these faith-resting days.

Take the first stanza—verses one to three. What is the key-note here? Put it in a word; it is "repression." Here you have the conscious curbing and controlling of the skeptical mood. The man is violently repressing a strong temptation to say