

Easter 5

18 May 2014-05-17

Acts 7:55-60; 1Peter 2:11-25; John 4:1-14

Called to live the way, the truth and the life.

Last week we started with 'where did that come from', why this gospel between Easter and Pentecost. Well today we can ask, why a 'farewell discourse' just 5 weeks after the resurrection. Why do we have Jesus talking about leaving, when he has just got back? But, you see, that is the point. This text gives us insight into what resurrection meant for the writer of John's Gospel. The disciples are faced with the incarnation coming to a close, Jesus' presence on earth is coming to an end, and Jesus needs them to understand that there is something on the other side of the crucifixion, because beyond that there is resurrection and ascension. Even the resurrection is not the end of the story; there is something even beyond its story, ascension for Jesus and all his believers. This section of chapter 14 in John describes, not resurrected life, but ascended life, life in the nearer presence of God. Just as Jesus will soon ascend to the Father, so also will all Jesus' followers, and Jesus has prepared a 'resting place' for them, and us. This house, this dwelling place, this room, (depending on which translation you are using), is not a 'place' as we know places here on earth. It is, in all its simplicity and complexity, 'being in the intimate presence of God'. Ascended life is life with God, with Jesus, with the Spirit, sharing in God's nearer presence, sharing an intimate bond with God and all that that intimacy brings with it. Where Jesus is, there we will be also.

And then Thomas chimes in with that typically 'human' response. 'Where? We don't know the way, We need a map'. And into this human misunderstanding Jesus speaks one of the more well know sayings, one of his "I AM" sayings. "I am the way, the truth and the life". In this "I AM" statement, we see Jesus as the source of life, abundant grace, the signal of the very presence of God. "No one comes to the Father except through me". But despite how those words are sometimes used as an exclusive and exclusionist statement, they are words of comfort for the disciples. Jesus was not speaking these words to traditional Jews, or people of other faiths, he was talking to his disciples, to those who were anxious and unsure about what was about to happen and how to move forward, - I am the way, follow me. He is addressing those of us who are already his followers and who are confused about what to

believe - I am the truth, believe in me. He is addressing those of us who are already his followers and who are fearful about the future - I am the life, live in union with me. This reading is not asserting supremacy of our faith over any other faith, nor is it saying that there are multiple roads to the same God and it doesn't matter which road you take. It simply says that this reading is actually not addressing that question, so don't use it to answer questions it isn't addressing.

If we read on to the next sentence Jesus tells the disciples "if you know me ... and you do". These are also comforting words for the disciples; there is nothing uncertain for their present or their future because of their relationship with Jesus. Look at my life and you will see the heart of God. You will see God's love for the lost and broken. Jesus invites us to look at him, see the heart of God: God is in me and I am in God.

So, after Thomas' 'foot in mouth' episode we then have one from Phillip 'show us the Father, and we will be satisfied'. Sounds like the 'show us the money!!!!', Phillip is telling Jesus he wants proof. Having told the disciples that if they have seen him, they have seen the Father, Jesus is asked for proof!!! I mean, what a cheek. You can just feel Jesus heart falling can't you. You can hear that frustrated 'AGGHHHHH!!!! what more can I do, they just won't get it'. That level of exasperation would be very understandable, and a typical human emotion, if we were in his place. But Jesus just replies, 'have I been with you all this time and you still don't know me?' Jesus himself called Phillip, when the multitude needed feeding it was to Phillip that Jesus turned and asked 'where can we get food for them', when the Greeks wanted to speak to Jesus they approached Phillip to arrange it, and yet here we have him saying 'where is the proof'. But Jesus simply turns this into an opportunity to teach the disciples about their future successes. 'The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and in fact will do greater works than these'. The works of Jesus are the works of God; life giving, restoring meaning to life, enriching life's meaning. This is also our challenge, to put meaning into life rather than just take meaning out of it. Jesus presents himself as the authentic vision of existence.

When the writer of John's Gospel wrote these words of Jesus down, he was writing to a Christian community who were alienated from their homes within Judaism, they were under severe pressure, even pressure of death as we heard in our first reading about Stephen,

pressure to abandon their distinctive faith claims and 'conform with the religious norms of the day'. Jesus is speaking about what it means to hold a Christian identity, what it means to be a follower of him. Now today, I am not sure we are under any pressure to abandon our faith in favour of another, yet on a different level, it could be said we are under varying degrees of pressure to abandon our faith in favour of nothing. An increasing percentage of today's population, as attested by the census data, claim no faith at all. During the week I read about an article which appeared in a Christian magazine in May this year, and it said "A Good Friday passion play was called off after the Oxford (England) City Council said the sponsoring church failed to get the proper permit. (Listen carefully now) *The council acted on the presumption that the "passion play" was a live sex show.* In a statement of apology, an official said, 'At the time of processing the application, I did not appreciate that this was a religious event.' " Now you may smirk, or shake your head in disbelief, or you may think it to be an isolated incident, but the truth is, that is how it is these days, increasingly in the 'general public sector' the mention of, what we would consider, well known or understood religious terms or references are met with blank stares, or statements indicating that the other person has no idea what you are talking about. It is not that these people are just expressing a desire to not engage with you, nor are they saying they do not want to have anything to do with religion or the church, they are telling us they have no idea what we are talking about, they have never heard of these things or these terms. Somehow I don't know which is worse, to be at risk of death for expressing a Christian belief, or to find the people to whom we are talking have no idea what we are saying, they have no understanding about Christianity, and therefore no basis on which to decide to become interested. So how do we share our faith? Jesus has given us a very good hint here; I am the way, the truth, the life. No one comes to the father except through me. As we wrestle with how to live as people of love and faith and peace and justice in the world, we come back to these words. I am the way, the truth and the life.

We are living in a time of unprecedented pluralism, the reason the Christian world view is no longer taken as 'norm' , is that it is no longer the only world view that people grow up knowing about. There are a multitude of world views with competing claims for the hearts and minds of people which affect the shape and direction of society. But, it is in the face of this pluralism that Jesus speaks to us who have identified ourselves with him "I am the way,

the truth, and the life. None of you comes to the Father except through me". We are not here to decide if Buddhism or any other faith offers the genuine way to God. We are here to live faithfully the way we have been called to follow, by faithfully taking the path Jesus puts before us, by not worrying about where the edges of that path might lead. Faithfully following the way of Jesus will not make us antagonistic to people of other faiths or no faith, but it will make us noticeably different from them. If we boldly and faithfully follow Jesus, we will grow into a radical hospitality that welcomes the stranger as an icon of the risen Christ and that will stand in stark and confronting contrast to the selfish, xenophobic position that sees an increasing number of Australians calling for border protection and mandatory detention of those seeking asylum and a new life here in this country. What we are doing here each time we gather, is unapologetically an endeavour to faithfully follow Jesus and no other. We listen to our readings from scripture that have shaped the Christian tradition so that we might be shaped in that tradition. We gather around this table as the body of Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory and praise of the Father so that we might be fed and strengthened and inspired to live our lives as the body of Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory and praise of the Father. Whether other ways may also lead to God is not our concern. Our call is to live the way, the truth, and the life that have been made known to us in Jesus.

Our Gospel ends with the promise that we can align ourselves with God, and when we do, we will be able to do greater things than our human brains can imagine. We all have powers we cannot hope to imagine, and they are released when we align ourselves with Christ's way, by letting Christ be the centre of our experience and letting God's vision guide us moment by moment. We will indeed be on holy ground; we are always on holy ground.

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