

SERMON for Easter 5 – May 7, 2023.

Readings: Acts 7: 55-60; Psalm 31: 1-5, 17-18; 1 Peter 2: 11-25; John 14: 1-14.

As I said last week, this Easter period is about exploring what it means to be people of the resurrection. This week we have readings which are quite confronting, on one level, but also full of promise and encouragement.

In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles this week, we discover we have entered the story near the end. It is the story of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and his final witness. His final words are an echo from the Cross, the words of Jesus, who he had been witnessing to:

"Lord, do not hold this sin against them." [Acts 7:60b]

Hidden away in this story, nearly lost in the significance of this first martyr, is the mention of 'a young man named Saul' [v58b]. This young man would also change the world with his witness. After a time of ruthlessly persecuting followers of the Way, he would, on the way to persecute those who had fled to Damascus, discover that he had got it all wrong! His Damascus road conversion would not only change him, change his name to Paul, but would change the world, as the Gentile world was opened to the Good News of the Gospel.

Peter in his letter, encourages us to live lives which are honourable, obedient to the authority we live under and not to be provoked by injustice or harsh treatment, but to live our lives with integrity and respect for all.

These readings are, in my opinion, overshadowed by our gospel reading.

The first part of this reading is a favourite at funeral services.

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.... [John 14: 1]

Let's put it in its context. This takes place during that final meal, up in the Upper Room before Jesus' arrest.

Jesus is speaking to his closest followers in private as they faced the uncertainty of life without him around. They are not sure if they've got what it takes to continue in the way he has shown them. Peter thinks he probably does, but in the verse immediately before we picked up the story, Jesus has just told him that within hours Peter will be pretending he's never even heard of him.

When John writes these words down, he is writing for a Christian community which has been forced out of their spiritual home within Judaism, and are under increasing pressure, sometimes even on pain of death, as we heard in the reading from Acts, to give up the distinctive claims of their faith and conform with the religious norms of their day. In the midst of that, Jesus' words are addressing questions of Christian identity; of what it means to be followers of Jesus. ¹

Jesus reassures this homeless, frightened Community and us, "Let not your hearts be troubled ... In my Father's house are many rooms". Jesus asks for our faith and tells us not to worry. Ultimately, these homeless believers will find an eternal dwelling place in God through Jesus.

Philip, in his anxiety, says to Jesus, "Lord, show us God, and we will be satisfied." Jesus response to that is that if you have seen him, you have already encountered God.

Today, a spiritually hungry, spiritually confused and spiritually homeless world says to the Church, "Show us God." The mission of the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, is to be a place of encounter with God.

In answer to his anxious followers, Jesus gives them those immortal words:

"I am the way, the truth and the life." [John 14:6]

Unfortunately, those words have often been used to exclude rather than include and give comfort.

At our Clergy Retreat this week, the Archdeacon preached on this passage, at our final service. We did ask him to send us a copy but it hasn't come through yet!

He unpacked this saying in a new a different way.

As you are probably aware, members of the early church were known as followers of The Way. John, the writer of this very different gospel account, was the last of the four gospels we have, to be written. As I said, by that stage, it was very common to refer to the followers of Jesus as followers of The Way. Whether that is where he got the concept from or not, it is probably a bit of 'chicken and egg' situation.

Whichever, Jesus was certainly encouraging his followers to live the way he had, using his life as an example of how to live our lives.

Within this statement we hear the profound reality that Jesus is the truth, the truth of God made flesh, the truth that was God at the beginning of time.

You remember Pilate's question of Jesus at his trial "What is truth?" [John 18: 38a] He was standing right before it. Jesus said he had come to testify to the truth and those who belong to the truth listen to his voice. [John 18: 36]

And we know that Jesus came to bring abundant life to all who would listen, all who would come to him, all who would follow him.

As we bask in the glow of the resurrection during these Sundays of Easter, it is good for us to reflect on our mission as the People of God. We believe that Jesus is "the way, the truth, and the life." I believe this a positive assertion about the person of Christ and not criteria for excluding others. How can we, as the People of God, respond to the request, "Show us God"?"²

How do we witness to our faith and live our lives in this 21st century, a society which has definitely changed from the society we grew up in, without being accused of being out of touch?

Our journey of faith was intended to be carried out in community with other followers, as much as humankind was designed to be creatures that lived in relationship with others - in love, compassion and hope with faith.

An e-friend of mine once wrote:

"... it is to us, as we wrestle with how to live as people of love and faith and peace and justice in the world we find ourselves in, that Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. None of you comes to the Father except through me." He did not address these words to the Hindus or the Muslims or even to those Jews who did not believe in him.

He addressed them to those of us who were already his followers and who were anxious and uncertain about the way forward. "I am the way. Follow me."

He addressed them to those of us who were already his followers and who were not sure what to believe. "I am the truth. Believe in me."

He addressed them to those of us who were already his followers and who were fearful for the future. "I am the life. Live in union with me."¹

Now is the time, more than ever, we need to give witness to what it is to be followers of The Way, people of the resurrection, witnessing to Jesus, so that through our witness, we can show a confused and hurting world, God. Amen.

Revd Sally Buckley
7th May, 2023.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

1. Nathan Nettleton; his draft sermon posted on *preachingtheword* in 2002.
2. Mark Friesland; his comments posted on *gospeltalk*