

Fifth Sunday of Easter – YrA – 7 May 2023

Message – Finding light in the darkness

Source of All Being, Eternal Word, and Holy Spirit, open our hearts and minds to embrace Christ, the way, the truth and the life. **Amen.**

Today's gospel is often read at funerals. The link in our cycle of readings to the death of Stephen, the first person martyred for following the way of the Nazarene, is no surprise. The passage brings comfort. It is a part the collection of teachings that St John draws together as Christ's final words to the disciples before his death, the farewell discourse.

As, a pastoral technique, telling people things such as, '*Do not let your hearts be troubled*' is not recommended. Rarely, challenge is appropriate, more often, meeting people where they are and helping them find their own way is more helpful. From Jesus, perhaps, these words were said with the intent that the disciples would return to them later and understand them in the light of his death and resurrection.

At this point, the disciples did not understand what was to happen, their distress was born out of confusion. Perhaps there were no words that Christ could have said that would have brought comfort in that moment.

At times, when we walk with those who are in distress, there will be no words that can bring peace. We may be able to sow seeds for the future or we may best be able to express

compassion through lament or even sitting silently, words may be no help at all.

Though Jesus knew what was to come and we are told he was himself deeply troubled, in heart and spirit (12:27, 13:21), he was the one offering comfort. Jesus was continuing to help the disciples, and us through them, understand God's revelation in the Word incarnate, the clearest self-revelation God can possibly give us this side of death.

The messages of the farewell discourse are largely intended for the Church. John, and those who edited the gospel, would have had churches they knew in mind as they wrote. Yet, the messages speak to us today just as clearly. And, though this is a passage we often offer as a source of comfort it is also profoundly challenging.

There are parts of the church that place a lot of emphasis on the final statement of the passage: *'If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.'* There is little point in arguing with those who understand the statement in a simplistic way. You will be told that you do not have enough faith if your prayers are not answered. Or worse, they tell those for whom they have prayed, who are not healed, that those who are not healed lack faith. Placing a further burden on the one who is already burdened with illness is rarely the actions of a loving God, or loving and compassionate servants of God.

And, given that we need have faith only the size of a mustard seed in order to move a mountain, it is reasonable to think there might be other explanations why our prayers are not always answered in the way we hope.

Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. Every part of the life of Christ brought glory to God. And, it was not deeds of power that brought the greatest glory. It was what might be seen as the ultimate act of weakness, submission to God's mysterious plan, to death on a tree, that brought the greatest glory. God's ways are most certainly not our ways.

Such an act seems like utter defeat. Yet, this is the way of Christ. Our prayers will be answered when we know the will of God, when we understand the way of Christ, when we perceive what will truly bring glory to God, and more often than not, that is not deeds of power or miraculous healing.

The greatest glory is found in those who, in the face of great suffering, find grace and peace in God; people who in the struggles and tragedies of life show that peace which the world cannot give. It is humbling and inspiring to see. In the face of darkness and struggle, such people trust God, something greater than themselves, and continue to show love for all around them, they continue to see all the good in life, to express gratitude, without denying the reality of their struggles or the darkness they experience.

Christ calls us to take up our cross, it is not the easy way; it is the only way to life in all its fullness. The challenges of the passage continues here. Many of us will feel a deep dis-ease with '*No one comes to the Father except through me.*' How can the God of all creation possibly provide only one way to fullness of life, particularly, when it appears reliant on human's who have freewill and the unerring ability to mess up anything and everything.

There are no easy answers. There is no convincing reading of the Gospel of St John that is anything other than exclusive. Christ the only one who can say, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life.' Yet, this is never said in a way that is dismissive of the truth that is in others. Christ seeks to bring to life whatever truth is found in others.

Seen in us, this has to be with the humbling recognition that we are fallible. The diversity of belief and practices among Christians alone shows that it is profoundly unlikely that we are the first person in two millennia to have understood every revelation of God perfectly.

And, if we then turn our attention to those of other faiths, even those of no faith, we will often see in their lives areas that look at least as, if not a lot more, Christ like than our own lives. We believe in a God of mercy, love, and mystery. We will not understand it all and we do not need to. In the words of Micha, *'God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?'*

Christ has show us the way *'to walk humbly with [our] God?'*

Some of you will be wondering about the image on the front of the pewsheet. I wanted to find an image of *'the way, the truth, and the life'* but Ben and I ended up in despair at the art that might relate to this. Edvard Munch's painting, *'the sun'* was suggested by the Vanderbilt Library, who happen to also have the best index of the revised common lectionary! The painting spoke to me of the journey towards the light.

Edvard Munch was someone who knew great darkness, you are probably familiar with his painting the scream, which was based on his personal experience, and a poem he wrote:

I walked along the road with two
friends—
 and the Sun set
 the Sky suddenly blood
—and I felt as a gust of melancholy
I stopped—leaned against the fence
tired to death
Over the blue-black fjord and city
laid clouds of dripping smoking
blood
My friends walked on and I stood
lone in the anxiety with an open wound
in my breast.
 a great shriek tore through nature

The painting '*the sun*' which, like the scream, Munch painted many times, speaks of a person who knew great darkness also being drawn to the light, to hope, to the possibility of fullness of life. All of us will experience times of darkness, hopefully all of us in such time will, hold on to the light of Christ, the way, the truth, and the life. And, if we cannot, hopefully someone else will hold onto that light for us.

I am still in search of a painting to speak of the way, the truth, and the life. In the meantime the words of Thomas à Kempis will have to do:

Follow thou me.

I am the way and the truth and the life.

Without the way there is no going;
without the truth there is no knowing;
without the life there is no living.

I am the way which thou must follow;
the truth which thou must believe,
the life for which thou must hope.

I am the inviolable way;
the infallible truth,
the never-ending life.

I am the straightest way;
the sovereign truth;
life true, life blessed, life uncreated.