

Do not let your hearts be troubled

Easter 5/Christian Aid/VE75

May my words be faithful to the written word and may the written word lead us to the Living Word, Jesus the Lord. Amen.

Two disciples, Thomas (whom we encountered on Easter 2) and Philip, stand out in the gospel conversation with Jesus. The setting is Jesus' farewell address at his last supper with his disciples. Jesus has washed his disciples' feet and has explained to them what this means (13:1-20). He has foretold his betrayal by Judas, and Judas has slipped out into the night (13:21-30). He has told his disciples that he will be with them only a little while longer, and that where he is going, they cannot come (13:33). He has also foretold Peter's imminent denial (13:36-38).

No wonder the disciples are troubled. Their beloved teacher is leaving them, one of their own has turned against them, and the stalwart leader among the disciples is said to be on the cusp of a great failure of loyalty. It is as though the ground is shifting beneath their feet.

And Jesus is preparing people for not being able to be physically present with him (- somewhat potent for our times, perhaps?).

In 14.1 Jesus admonishes his disciples not to be troubled. The word is the same verb the evangelist used in the account of Lazarus's raising to describe Jesus's emotion when he saw Lazarus's sister Mary (in 11.33). So perhaps we need to be a little more gentle on ourselves when our hearts are troubled,

that Jesus's was too at times and that the struggle with belief I spoke of on Easter 2 is a continuing one.

Jesus then offers the well known words, 'In my Father's house there are many dwelling places...I go and prepare a place for you.' Ross, on Tuesday, offered the insight that as we 'Zoom-worship' we have an a wonderful representation of this. Just look at the screen on Gallery view and you'll see the biblical image leap off the page at you! Importantly this language denotes intimacy and togetherness, not spatial location, as we so often assume in modern Christianity. The Twitter exchanges and angry letters within the CofE at the moment are a sad indictment of this, I believe, where we have taken the battle to be over physical space and buildings, rather than the presence of the Risen Christ among us, within us and beyond us. The Greek word for 'dwelling place' has the same root as the word 'abide', that is a 'being with' Jesus. So, wherever Jesus is, there too are those who believe in him.

When Jesus says that they know the way to the place where he is going (14:4), Thomas, like most characters in the Gospel, takes Jesus quite literally. He wants directions, a road map to this place (14:5). Jesus responds by saying that he himself is the way: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6).

Thomas is a bit like those who want a clear road map out of lockdown. 'What's going to happen, when? In what order and what time?' Jesus doesn't get caught in this. Instead he promises his abiding presence. And importantly this is not said against those outside Christianity, rather it is a message of assurance and hope. It is not a phrase we can allow to

become an ‘adamantine wall behind which we cower, popping up occasionally to hurl spitballs at those outside our own belief system.’

Jesus knew that his preaching would sometimes cause offence and be mis-used. But then he’s not alone in that. As the famous first world war Chaplain Studdert Kennedy has written on his his memorial plaque erected at Worcester Cathedral: A POET: A PROPHET: A PASSIONATE SEEKER AFTER TRUTH: AN ARDENT ADVOCATE OF CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP.

He regularly wound up his listeners, and even one of his incumbents entreated him to only have one heresy per sermon, or otherwise it became ‘rather tedious’!

Perhaps less well known Woodbine Willie was also a poet. Not one of the great War Poets of the First World War, but his work spoke to people at the time, and some of his work speaks to us. As we think of the sacrifice of the Second World War coming so soon after the First, his words merit attention. In his poem "The Comrade God" he writes:

Art Thou so great that this our bitter crying
Sounds in Thine ears like sorrow of a child?
Hast Thou looked down on centuries of sighing,
And, like a heartless mother, only smiled?

...

He rejects this view of God, and then continues:

Only in Him can I find a home to hide me,
Who on the Cross was slain to rise again;
Only with Him, my Comrade God,
beside me, Can I go forth to war with sin and pain.

(Brant, page 42)

He speaks elsewhere of a fourfold picture of truth: dying, living, risen and ascended: he wrote, 'A new birth without a crucifixion is impossible, a crucifixion without a resurrection would drive any human being stark staring mad. ... To see the world as a crucifix without an empty tomb would be a vision too terrible for any human being to look upon, it would drive him, like Judas, shrieking with horror into the night to which there are no stars. We must have the whole faith. The meaning of life is Advent, Christmas, Good Friday, Easter Day, Ascensiontide, and Pentecost - for the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us - and that was the manner of Christ's dwelling' (Brant, page 132).

At this moment, as we bring our gratitude for our freedom at so high a cost in the Second World War and the relief of VE Day, we mark a celebration like no other. Yet, as Churchill said in a statement to the House of Commons on VE Day, 1945: 'We may allow ourselves a brief period of rejoicing, but let us not forget for a moment the toils and efforts that lie ahead.'

Today we also think of the needs of those in dire situations around the globe and the amazing ministry of Christian Aid, as we think of our world struggling with COVID-19, we continue to bring to the Church the needs and hopes of all the people, for the glory of God.

Christian Aid has been going for many years, and is the UK's longest-running fundraising week. In the 1940s they helped refugees in need at the end of the Second World War. The vision is to end poverty and they are well known for the saying 'We believe in life before death'. Their purpose is to expose the scandal of poverty and to change structures and systems

that favour the rich and powerful. Helping those in need, regardless of religion, ethnicity or nationality. If you'd like to know more, you may like to join the former Archbishop, Dr Rowan Williams, for a Christian Aid Service at 1pm today, or go to the website.

But to return to our gospel briefly, Jesus assures us of his abiding presence even when we are stirred, troubled, agitated. It reminds me of the self isolation of Naamah and Noah in the arc. Perhaps you'll remember it rained for 40 days and 40 nights. Then they had to shelter and then do all sorts of tests (albeit with a raven and a dove). Like us there were different elements and even when the storm was over, it wasn't over (as Churchill said).

As we are fed by the words of our Gospel from the words of the farewell discourse, it reminds us in our time of lockdown that boundaries imposed by the linear course of time are transcended by communal anamnesis. The past is discovered to be bewilderingly present - whether in the relief of the VE day joy and our own memories, or those of our ancestors; the joy of Christian Aid's mercy and kindness to others in need; the relief of Naamah and Noah coming out of lock down, and our own hopes for this and, supremely, that the Risen Christ still stands among us and encourages us not to let our hearts be troubled, even as the ground shifts beneath our feet. Jesus is the abiding one, and where Jesus is, we are too. And where we are, there Jesus is likewise.

Alleluia, Christ is Risen!