

5th Sunday of Easter 5 (A)

He is the Way

John 14: 1-14

One of the greatest and most humbling privileges of ordained ministry is to be with people as they're dying. It's a time and place where I have a very real sense that I'm on holy ground – that I'm in a space that stands on the borders between heaven and earth – what our Celtic forebears call a thin-place. Sometimes little is said, but at other times conversations take place as the dying person reflects on their life, asks questions, and ponders what it all means. These conversations are among the most treasured I've ever had, and I usually feel that I have received far more from the dying than I've ever been able to give, for their words can be packed with deep wisdom.

Today's Gospel passage is set within a similar context. They are verses that begin an extended passage (from chapter 14 through to the end of chapter 17 of John's Gospel) that's described as Jesus' Farewell Discourse. He's aware that he's approaching death, and he shares with his disciples his accumulated wisdom. I think of these chapters as like a final love letter to his friends as he shares with them what they need to know as they prepare for a life without his physical presence.

Some of the words we heard may be particularly poignant because they are ones that we've heard at funerals, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?'

As Jesus faces suffering and death, he knows that his relationship with his disciples will not end. The bond will continue, and he will remain in their lives. What's more, that relationship will take on a new dimension and lead to something even richer and lasting, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.' Even though he'll not be physically present the disciples will not be abandoned. That promise reaches out beyond the first disciples and embraces us. We can't see the way ahead, the future is unknown and uncertain – yet a welcome, a home, a place of belonging is assured to those who believe in Jesus. It reminds me of prayer we often use which speaks of when we come to the end of our journey, we will know the joy of our homecoming and the welcome of God's embrace.

When Jesus speaks of belief, he doesn't mean a doctrinal or intellectual thing. It's relational. It's about trusting him, trusting the love he has for us – the love which Paul described as that from which nothing in death or life, in the world as it is, or the world as it shall be, nothing in all creation, can separate us from. In this passage Jesus goes on to elaborate on that relationship by responding to a question put by Thomas, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'

More than anything, these familiar words point us to that trusting relationship with Jesus as 'the way' – trusting him as our companion and guide upon the way, trusting him to see the fulfilment of our hopes, our longings, and desires. These words point us to the divine love which holds us even in the face of death and offers meaning and purpose when all the glitter of the world about us has become tarnished.

Sometimes these words have been used by Christians in an arrogant manner, implying an exclusion of those who don't follow their understanding of the gospel. But the more I seek to follow Jesus, the more I experience it as a journey of discovery which entails questions and searchings, but always in

the company of Jesus. He's the companion on this journey that takes us through the trials and tribulations, as well accompanying us in our joys and delights of life.

W.H. Auden wrote an epic poem entitled *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*. In it there's a chorus that draws on the imagery of Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life. It paints a picture of that journey which we all travel in unique ways.

He is the Way.
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.¹

Auden's words speak to me about how on a journey with Jesus we learn to expect the unexpected. Rare beasts and unique adventures are everywhere. Just when we think that we've have seen it all, when we think we've worked it out, we experience something new. When we think we've arrived, there, around the corner is another challenge, another opportunity to grow and to experience God in new and different ways. And there's the suggestion that it's in the embracing of our anxiety, of somehow welcoming what frightens us, instead of running from it, that truth is found. And we find God in the world we live. We find Jesus, not apart from life, but in life – in the flesh, in all that we do, in all that we are. We find God in one another, and we love Christ by loving the world about us, of which we are a part.

He is the way – follow him. He is the truth – seek him. He is the life – love him. Here is a journey, a lifetime journey of relationship that culminates in a dance for joy as we're welcomed home – a relationship encircled in a love that will never end – that will never let us go.

Alister Hendery
Hastings – 7.5.2023

¹ For the Time Being - A Christmas Oratorio' in *W.H. Auden Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 400