

Easter 5

10 May 2020

READINGS

Acts 7.55-60

But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died.

1 Peter 2.2-10

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation — if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house,

to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture:

'See, I am laying in Zion a stone,

a cornerstone chosen and precious;

and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'

To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,

'The stone that the builders rejected

has become the very head of the corner',

and

'A stone that makes them stumble,

and a rock that makes them fall.'

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people,

in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of

darkness into his marvellous light.

Once you were not a people,

but now you are God's people;

once you had not received mercy,

but now you have received mercy.

John 14: 1-14

'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? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.' Thomas said to him, '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. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Do

you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

COLLECT

Almighty God,
who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ
have overcome death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life:
grant that, as by your grace going before us
you put into our minds good desires,
so by your continual help
we may bring them to good effect;
through Jesus Christ our risen Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

(or)

Risen Christ,
your wounds declare your love for the world
and the wonder of your risen life:
give us compassion and courage
to risk ourselves for those we serve,
to the glory of God the Father.

SERMON

Ylva Blyd-Mackenzie

Jesus: our way, our truth and our life. A Reflection on John 14:1-14

Today's Gospel reading is familiar to anyone who has attended a funeral in the Church of England. When I was training to become an Authorised Funeral Minister, this was , and still is, the fallback position. If no other reading is known, or requested by the family, this is the one you end up with.

"Familiarity breeds contempt", we say, and maybe this could indeed be true of this Bible reading. What new thing can we say about this? What have we not said before? What have we not noticed?

This text is very comforting; an important feature when speaking to bereaved and upset people, such as many of us are today. Jesus is asking us not to worry, not to be afraid. He is going before us, in death as He has in life. His care for his flock does not finish at the end of earthly life.

But He is also telling the disciples, and us by implication, that they already know the way to where He is going, and so can safely follow in his footsteps. But the disciples have not grasped what He is talking about. Here He is, very much alive in front of their eyes. How can He be giving instructions about what will happen after his death?

This is like when a person is in knowledge that they have got only a limited time left before death and so wants to put their house in order. Often the relatives do not want to hear. They joke about it, or try and dissuade the dying person that this is not the case: "Don't be morbid, Mother", or "Let's not dwell on it, I'm sure you will get better soon". This often leads to tragic misunderstandings, or to people not being able to have the type of death, or the funeral that they would have wanted.

For Jesus it is the same. His friends are baffled, bewildered, confused. Thomas is the spokesperson for all of them, when he asks how Jesus expects them to follow him , when they don't know where He is heading? What is this way that Jesus is talking

about?

Jesus is of course talking about himself. He is the way. If they, and we, follow him, He will lead us to His Father's house, where there is room for us all. Not only is He the way, but He is the truth and the life, He tells the disciples. What does this mean for us?

In this well known, and therefore over-used, passage, Jesus is talking about faith in him as a way of life, an all-encompassing relationship that changes us. But Jesus is not grandstanding for his own sake. This is no ego trip, "all about me" statement. Jesus is pointing away from himself, like a true waypost, to his Father. He and the Father are one, he tells them. If we know him, we know his Father, who is no one other than God.

And so, when He promises that He is going to prepare a place for us, and to come back to take us to himself to dwell with him in his Father's house; it is a promise for all eternity, for union with God for ever.

In this period of extreme restrictions, when funerals are limited to the attendance of very close family members, many are also denied the send-off that they should have wished for, and which their family and friends so dearly would have loved to give them. Many are dying in less than ideal circumstances. But one is there to keep them company, to sooth their fears and calm their hearts; Jesus himself, as He has promised.

In Acts today we read about St Stephen and his brave speech that so angered some people that he was stoned to death. In Stephen's case, Jesus received his spirit, as he died at the hands of his adversaries. When we die, whatever the circumstances, He will surely receive us too.

Amen

HYMN

jesu, lover of my soul
Charles Wesley

Jesu, lover of my soul,
Let me to Thy bosom fly,
While the nearer waters roll,
While the tempest still is high:
Hide me, O my Savior, hide,
Till the storm of life is past;
Safe into the haven guide;
O receive my soul at last.

Other refuge have I none,
Hangs my helpless soul on Thee;
Leave, oh, leave me not alone,
Still support and comfort me.
All my trust on Thee is stayed,
All my help from Thee I bring;
Cover my defenseless head
With the shadow of Thy wing.

Thou, O Christ, art all I want;
More than all in Thee I find;
Raise the fallen, cheer the faint,
Heal the sick and lead the blind.
Just and holy is Thy name,
I am all unrighteousness;
Vile and full of sin I am,
Thou art full of truth and grace.

Plenteous grace with Thee is found,
Grace to cover all my sin;
Let the healing streams abound;
Make and keep me pure within.
Thou of life the fountain art,
Freely let me take of Thee;
Spring Thou up within my heart,
Rise to all eternity.