

Easter 5: 14 May John 14:1-14

Nikolai and I are grieving deeply. Our beloved Burmese cat, Jacque, the heart of our home, died on Wednesday. We are so sad and empty. So many here are grieving too. Partners, parents, children have died or moved away, or seem to disappear with dementia... Sometimes, it seems, there are no words to say, no comfort, just presence..

And some are rejoicing in new life at this time. We bless a new little one at 10am. Many celebrate the gift of mothers today too.

Our gospel reading is so often read at funerals, and can give some solace at sad times, as well as hope in good times, as we rest in the heart of God, who weeps with us, laughs with us, is with us no matter what is happening in our lives.

Loader writes (adapted)¹:

'The passage does not stand alone in its context, but forms part of Jesus' parting words to his disciples. Earlier, Jesus announced his return to the Father's glory (his glorification) and went on to explain that he was going somewhere where the disciples could not follow him (at least, not for now). This is the beginning of confusion on the part of the disciples. Peter, missing the point, insists he will follow (13:36) and will even lay down his life to do so (13:37). Jesus knows what Peter does not: one day he, too, will be killed (21:18). But for now Peter will fail and deny belonging to Jesus.

The conversation continues in our reading where Jesus says more about his departure and the disciples take it in turn to ask rather naive questions, right through until the end of the chapter.

In the ancient world a person's last words were always very special. Biographers would take great care to ensure they contained the most important things which future generations should learn. This is also why people have found in these chapters of John a rich treasury for their faith.

¹ Loader: <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtEaster5.htm>

The disciples were confused by what Jesus had been saying and troubled by the foreboding his words evoked.

The response of Jesus is wonderfully simple: believe in God! believe in me (14:1)! Belief, here, includes believing that Jesus claims to represent God, but it also means trust. The trust is in the person, but there is more: There's a place for you! One wants to break out into the lyric from West Side Story. What a wonderful summary of the Christian gospel! **There's a place for you - in the heart of God, and that includes the realm of death.**

At this point John picks up the tradition about Jesus' coming again to gather his own (14:3). The focus is not details of a place but quality of a relationship, which includes that it lasts.

Remember that "dwelling place" is no "place" at all unless it means being in the intimate presence of God, or better yet, being at the bosom of the Father. Ascended life, toward which resurrection looks, means with God, with Jesus, sharing in their intimate bond and all that that intimacy entails. Where Jesus is, there we will be (14:3).² So, despite Peter's confusion earlier, it is true: they will follow him and be with him also beyond this life.

Thomas's confusion about how to get there (14:5) evokes the famous response: 'I am the way' (14:6) John is in no doubt: Jesus is the way. It is not claiming that Jesus points to the way, but that he, himself, is the way (and the truth and the life). This only makes sense if we see the focus on the relationship. The verses which follow make that clear (14:7 and 9-11). Jesus is not claiming any of this independently of God, but rather saying that they should 'believe in God' as they have seen God in Jesus.

Philip's confusion (14:8) helps move us further into what that means. Jesus' response uses words of intimacy and trust (14:9-11). The challenge is to recognise God in Jesus, in his words and deeds.

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1994

This is a fundamental Christian claim. For some it justifies an exclusive claim that denies that God is to be found anywhere else. For me, it justifies the claim to find God wherever God is recognisable by such words and deeds, even where Christian claims are not made or not known.

Then there is the extraordinary claim that the disciples will outdo Jesus. I'm sure his PR advisers would have counselled otherwise! The focus is not bigger miracles, but bigger mission, because he will send them equipped with the Spirit to speak of God's reality to people far beyond Galilee and Judea. Jesus sees his departure as making this explosion possible. On commission (14:15), equipped by the Spirit (14:16-17), they will go out to do greater things. This is also the setting for the promise about answered prayer in 14:13-14. It is not a blank cheque for every whim, but a promise about help for the mission!!

While John employs the individual disciples to enhance the drama, the message is simple and telling. Trust that God is the way Jesus told us and demonstrated to us. That means two things: **we can trust in the God of compassion in which there's a place for us (even if we know nothing else!) and we can know that the meaning of life is to share that compassion in the world - there's a place for all!**³

That's why we do Kairos, that's why we're starting Messy Church, that's why we visit nursing homes, that's why we run playgroup and mainly music, that's why we give away food, that's why we pray, that's why we offer hospitality at funerals... 'We can join God's compassion wherever we recognise its 'Jesus shape', acknowledging it as life and truth and the only way'.⁴

FACE OF GOD Andrew King

We thought you wore the skin

³ Loader: <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtEaster5.htm>

⁴ Loader: <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtEaster5.htm>

of thunder, spoke in verbs of stormwind,
majestic and mighty as lightning
upon summits,
unreachable
as the cold and silent fire
of distant stars; hidden behind
a curtain in the temple,
an untouchable invisibility approachable
by the highest priest only,
hands freshly blooded
from an altar.

And then somehow the veil was parted:
we gained glimpses of the glory
of the nearness of your love
as the hurting were healed,
the outcast befriended,
the lost restored,
and everywhere the powers of death
had their dominion challenged,
by the son of a Jewish carpenter
from Galilee.

*If you have seen me,
said Jesus, you have seen the Father.*

And we do see you there,
in the Gospels,
healing in synagogues
and in houses,
feeding the hungry on hillsides,
embracing the lepers and the sinners,
turning over the tables
in the temple,
nailed to a cross of injustice
but risen,
greeting women at
the graveside,
sharing bread with your friends,
the dominion of death

overturned.

Approachable, reachable,
the accessible God,
visible in the skin of Jesus.

But you are not done,
not content to wear
such skin only in the pages
of the Gospels.

The many-coloured, multi-shaped
body of Christ – the Church
wide as the nations of the world –
bears your image where it acts
in your love:
still feeding,
still healing,
still teaching mercy,
making you visible
not in great
structures nor
in high saints alone,
but in the ordinary
persons in the pews,
as here, on a day like any other,
a woman making dinner,
and packing it,
knocking on the door of a neighbour
newly home from surgery for cancer:
the face of the one receiving it
lit with thankfulness,
the face of the one freely giving
like the face
of God.⁵

Being a Christian doesn't take away the pain of grief and loss,
Stephen was martyred, enabled to forgive by his relationship.
Jacque, our cat, did die, but somehow, for me, at least, knowing

⁵ <https://earth2earth.wordpress.com/2014/05/11/poem-for-the-sunday-lectionary-easter-5/>

God is with me, with us, without judgement, with love, in it, helps.
There is a place for my beloved, and for me, and you, in the
compassionate heart of God.

Susanna