

## Easter 5: Dying to Self

St. Brandon's

Acts 7: 55-end; John 14: 1-14

10 May 2020

Our gospel reading this morning is, of course, one of those 'purple passages' of the Bible with phrases that are very familiar to us – "In my father's house there are many dwelling-places"; "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" being the two most obvious. But I want to start at the beginning of the passage, then work backwards from almost the end to the beginning, and then sideways, before coming back to the beginning again, so that, with luck, we will arrive where we started and know the place for the first time (to borrow from TS Eliot). And, of course, I tell you that, the route map of this sermon if you like, so none of you can say you didn't know where we were going, so how could you know the way! You have been told!

"Do not let your hearts be troubled", says Jesus. Well OK, but this is a troubling time. We face an uncertain future, not knowing how many will die as a result of the pandemic, whether we or others close to us will lose our lives. We are confronted, perhaps in a way we haven't been before, with the fragility and finitude of life. Neither do we know what the economic consequences will be, nor the effects on physical and mental health in the long term. We suspect that the world will be a different and quite possibly much more difficult place to live in particularly for some. And even if and when we 'get through' this (whatever that may mean), climate change, exacerbated poverty, Brexit (one of the few good things to come out of this is that we haven't heard that word in a long while!), and all the other problems of the world, together with our own problems, will still be there to confront us. This is, let's admit it, a depressing time. I would be surprised if there are any of you who have not felt at least a bit depressed, as I have, and perhaps we continue to live with some level of depression on an almost daily basis. But, into exactly that kind of situation, into exactly our situation, Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled."

Now clearly there needs to be something more to this than just a well-meant banality. And if we move, well not quite to the end of the passage (I'm not going to tackle the bits about doing greater works or answered prayer, directly at least), we begin to see why Jesus can say "Do not let your hearts be troubled" with an authority which moves it from a comforting opening remark almost to a command: "DO NOT let your hearts be troubled". And the reason He can say that starts with the fact that Jesus is saying very boldly and baldly, "I AM God". "Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father." "I AM in the Father and the Father is in me." In other words, if we want to know what God is like, who He is, we need to look no further than Jesus. God is as He is in Jesus. And surely it follows automatically from this that Jesus is the way to the Father. "I AM the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." If God is as He is in Jesus, then that obviously must be the case.

Now this, of course, means that if Jesus is the way, our job is simply to follow Him, to follow the way, and thereby to come to the Father, and I'll come back to that later. But there's a final part to this as we work our way back to the beginning of the passage. And this is, of course, that if we follow Jesus, the way, and the truth, and the life, we will eventually find ourselves in His Father's house. Indeed, Jesus will come again and take us there, to be with Him. Tom Wright in his commentary translates this as, "There is plenty of room in my father's house", implying not individual flats where we can each do our own thing(!), but a spaciousness which we can enjoy together. It might (or might not)

look a bit like this:

[https://www.bing.com/images/search?view=detailV2&ccid=ppLmbm3&id=10F167A28F32C6AAF08F254A2460D370099DE60&thid=OIP\\_ppLmbm327X3X9DEh9f3pQHafj&mediurl=https%3a%2f%2fpinimg.com%2f736x%2f3b%2f34%2ff9%2f3b34f96f1ecb09b0c78403fbf92e4470--my-fathers-house-photography-composition.jpg&exph=552&expw=736&q=My+Father%27s+House+Has+Many+Mansions&simid=60800729537935923&selectedIndex=53&ajaxhist=0](https://www.bing.com/images/search?view=detailV2&ccid=ppLmbm3&id=10F167A28F32C6AAF08F254A2460D370099DE60&thid=OIP_ppLmbm327X3X9DEh9f3pQHafj&mediurl=https%3a%2f%2fpinimg.com%2f736x%2f3b%2f34%2ff9%2f3b34f96f1ecb09b0c78403fbf92e4470--my-fathers-house-photography-composition.jpg&exph=552&expw=736&q=My+Father%27s+House+Has+Many+Mansions&simid=60800729537935923&selectedIndex=53&ajaxhist=0)

– which isn't, of course, Brancepeth Castle, but might be given the spiritual welcome we have received from there particularly over this period of time, and the broader sense of welcome and community which that place epitomises. But if your idea of heaven isn't a cold, draughty castle, don't worry! I'm sure it will be just whatever it is that you need it to be.

So we've arrived! Working backwards through the passage, we've come to the beginning again. Since God is as He is in Jesus; since Jesus is the way, and the truth, and the life, our way to God; since our loving heavenly Father has a spacious new heaven (perhaps even a new heaven and a new earth – Rev. 21: 1) for us where we will be with Him for ever, what possible reason could we have for being troubled? "DO NOT let your hearts be troubled" because, taking God as He is in Jesus and an eternal perspective, there really isn't anything to be troubled about.

Well, but, that's not how it feels at the moment, nor even perhaps in more normal circumstances. So let's go sideways for a moment.



This is Rembrandt's 'The Stoning of Saint Stephen', his first signed painting, painted when he was just 19.<sup>1</sup> You can see it in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon (if you're ever able to go there). Stephen, obviously, is kneeling in the foreground, bathed in light. Saul is seated high up in the background with the coats of the stoners on his lap rather than around his feet. One interesting thing about the picture

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is that the face immediately above Stephen's, almost hiding behind but looking round the man holding the rock above his head with both hands, is thought to be a self-portrait, as though Rembrandt is presenting himself as a participant who is having second thoughts about what was taking place and his involvement in it. Given that the passage from Acts depicts Stephen as Christ-like – he, like Jesus, sees “the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Mark 14: 62); he, like Jesus, prays “Lord ... receive my spirit” (Luke 23: 46); he, like Jesus, prays for the forgiveness of his murders (Luke 23: 34) – Rembrandt may have been asking himself, and asking us, just what our involvement, not just in Stephen's death but in Christ's death, might have been had we been there.

But while that might be something to think on further, it's not the main point I want to focus on. Stephen stands as an example, as the first Christian martyr, as to what it might actually mean to follow Christ. Jesus, of course, spoke the words about being the way, and the truth, and the life, *before* His own passion and death. And as we realise that, all of a sudden “I am the way” takes on a rather different meaning. Following Him as the way to the Father suddenly seems to mean taking a journey into passion and death. And, of course, Jesus had also already warned his disciples that if they wanted to become his followers, they should deny themselves, take up their cross daily and follow Him. And further that if they wanted to save their life, they would lose it, whereas those who lost their life for His sake would save it (Luke 9: 23-24). Stephen seems to stand before us as a physical and literal example of doing just that – losing his life for Jesus' sake, in order to save it.

So what might all that mean for us?<sup>2</sup> Well, I want to suggest that it means that we must learn to *practice death*, as St Paul puts it in the Epistle to the Romans (6: 3-4) when he asks us to die with Christ and to be baptized into his death. This seems to be a very strange idea, but one powerfully symbolized by being plunged into the dark waters of baptism before being rescued again. But what it means is that only by handing ourselves over, as Christ was handed over by his betrayers in the Passion, as Stephen was handed over into the hands of those who stoned him to death, handing ourselves over into a seeming *loss* of selfhood, as we give ourselves to God in prayer and worship and sacraments and service, only then will we find our true selves – the living Christ-like selves that God longs us to be in Jesus.

This is a particularly difficult idea for us, because it challenges everything that our culture teaches us: that we should aspire to be accomplished *individuals*, and autonomous ones at that. But when, through prayer, we realize that persevering in prayer means handing over the reins of control to God and just letting Christ's Spirit pray within us, then we begin to see that our false, conscious, striving self has to go. And as that self is worn away in a process that feels like death, something unimaginably mysterious starts to emerge – the new life of selfhood that is Christ's own and which transcends all our individualism. To be a Christian is to ‘practice death’ in this way, until we are no longer afraid of death, until we can live as if death were not; and when we are no longer afraid of death, then we are no longer afraid of life – the abundant life that Jesus, who is our life, holds out to us.

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<sup>2</sup> The following is taken largely from meditation 6 in a set of meditations on the death and resurrection of Jesus by Sarah Oakley available from <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/meaning-beyond-meaning-meditations-on-the-death-and-resurrection/10099926>.

Now this might sound complicated and difficult if not impossible. But all of us are already some of the way along this path, and all of us, as we pray and live the Christian life through worship and sacraments and service, are progressing further along it as we seek to follow Christ. But perhaps in this time of the Covid-19 pandemic, with its uncertainty and fear about the future, what we are finding is that we are actually being pushed (dragged?) along this path, this way of Christ, rather more rapidly than we might wish. But perhaps we can help that process by being more and more willing to hand over the reins of control to God and just let go. And as we 'practice death' in this way, we may well find that we are no longer afraid of it – for ourselves or for anyone else – and can therefore take hold of the abundant life that Jesus, who is our life, offers us.

And then, just perhaps, to return to the beginning, we will find that our hearts are indeed no longer troubled. Amen.