

DO NOT BE WORRIED

John 14:1-14
1 Peter 2:2-10

For many people, when we read Jesus' words found in John 14 we are immediately transported into the realm of funerals. Just this week I was reading this passage with one of our elderly members, Bertha Morrison, as part of a home communion, and when I had finished, and before we continued with the communion, Bertha began to speak about her own funeral. For her, the connection was immediate, and she is not alone in that.

Jesus, of course, is not speaking at a funeral, but he is speaking at a time when he knows that his friends are about to feel many of the emotions that we associate with bereavement - sadness, loss, confusion, perplexity, displacement, fear and even anger. Just before we have these comforting words, which begin "Do not be worried or upset..." Jesus has told Peter that he is about to deny him three times. "Peter will do this, but do not let your hearts be troubled..." He wouldn't say that if he didn't know that in fact their hearts would certainly incline to being troubled. As do ours, of course. We feel troubled at times of bereavement, whether it is a death or the departure of a friend or a child for a distant place. We feel troubled when intimations of our own mortality come our way, or when our livelihood seems threatened. We feel troubled when we realise that the world is changing, when we hear intimations of global warming, of world-wide food shortages, of financial instability and hardship. "Do not let your hearts be troubled." which doesn't mean that we should glibly dismiss the troubles of the world, it means that we can be calm as we face them.

Peter was writing to a people who knew most of these bereavement type feelings: sadness, loss, confusion, perplexity, displacement, fear and even anger. His letter is addressed to Christians who had been displaced from their homes, driven away and persecuted simply because of their faith. They had lost their roots, their status, often their family connections and their occupations, and so they had lost the things that were familiar to them and which made life feel safe and comfortable. They had a lot to mourn, a lot to be troubled about.

Peter is writing to the scattered Jewish Christians, and he is writing to us: to the scattered Christians who have been driven out of Iraq, to the scattered Christians who fear to assemble in Iran, to the scattered Christians of Palestine, who are divided one from another by the checkpoints and the wall of their neighbours. Peter is writing to the refugee Christian fleeing persecution in Kenya, in Zimbabwe, in Cameroon. He is writing to the vulnerable Christian in Europe, in Britain, in Scotland, and even here in Stow/Heriot: people who feel that acknowledging their faith makes them a target for criticism, or for misunderstanding; people who fear that acknowledging their faith will make them a target for ostracism, or even for attack.

Peter writes to the exiles and he invites them to do what they have already done - to come to Jesus, to keep on coming. "Come to him," he says, "a living stone, though rejected by mortals, yet chosen and precious in God's sight." Come to him. And Jesus says "I am the way." Jesus who knows all about rejection and ostracism, all about vulnerability and misunderstanding, says "I am the way."

The Church has, of late, often had difficulty with these words of Jesus. How can he claim to be the way? How can we say that in following him, we are following the way? There is a lot of pressure on us, as reasonable people, as good citizens, to say that Jesus is one of the ways, but not the one way. There is pressure on us to affirm that all religions are good and valid ways to God.

But how can we do this? It may sound nice to say that all religions are basically the same - although a quick study of the subject will tell you otherwise - but if you dethrone Jesus, then you enthrone something else. If all religions are equally valid, then what you are saying is that none of them can provide more than a distant echo of God's voice, a distorted image of an unknowable reality. But, as John insists throughout his gospel, Jesus came to put an end to such distance and distortion. Jesus came to reveal God to us. Other religions may contain a distant echo of his voice, but in Jesus - not in Christianity, but in Jesus - we see God made flesh. In Jesus God comes so close to us as to become one of us. The truth, the life, through which we find the way, is Jesus himself: the Jesus who washed his disciples' feet and told them to copy his example, the Jesus who was the shepherd on his way to lay down his life for his sheep. We may be accused of arrogance if we say Jesus is the way, but Jesus himself was far from arrogant, far from self-serving. If the church wants to be able to say that Jesus is the way, then we must remember to follow in the way that he showed us.

He was the way for the disciples, and for Peter's dispersed readers, and continues so for all of us who are inclined to be troubled by life, by the world, by our own circumstances or by the difficulties of others. "Come to him," says Peter, "...and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house." Jesus was a living stone, and because he is the way, we too can be living stones. Jesus was rejected, but chosen by God, precious and valuable, and we too, though in following his way we may be rejected, are also chosen and valuable - "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people."

Jesus gives us our place and our position, our beauty and our value for right now, where we are and what we are. "Where I am, you will be also." If we follow in his way this is true for every moment of every day. It is a promise that he is with us. It is a promise that we will learn to pray in accord with his will, to pray for things with which he wants to be associated so that God can freely answer our prayers. Five years ago, when the war with Iraq was very much imminent but hadn't yet started, there were demonstrations, remember? Huge marches took place in London and Glasgow, and what did the people say, verbally and on their banners "Not in my name." They didn't want to be associated with this war, it wasn't something they could let happen without registering dissent. Jesus says we are to pray in his name - in line with the things which please him, to which he can give assent. We are to pray and we are to live in his name, for he is the way.

He gives us his promise for all eternity as well. "Where I am, you will be also."

There is another promise given us, in these comforting words, as Jesus tries to stop his disciples from giving way to worry and despair. We are promised that we will be more than we are. Surely Peter is thinking of this when he says that coming to him we become like him, living stones for building together. We find it very hard not to think of the church as the building. It's particularly hard when we have such beautiful buildings

entrusted to us to care for.

But let me tell you a story, a story which was first told by an American preacher, named Fred Craddock. Craddock tells of how when he was a young student pastor for one summer he served a Baptist church in a poor, rural location in the Appalachian mountains. It was the custom at that church to hold a baptismal service in the local lake on the evening of Easter day. The candidates for baptism were taken into the shallow waters of the lake and immersed, proclaiming their faith, while the congregation waited on the shore, singing around a fire and cooking a supper. The candidates came out of the water, one by one and changed from their wet clothes in makeshift changing cubicles, then joined the people around the fire. Last of all Craddock, his baptising duties done, changed and went to join them.

Before any of the good food that was cooking could be eaten that church had a further ritual. One of the elders introduced the new people, and gave their names, where they lived and what their jobs were, if they were employed. Then the rest of the people formed a circle around them, letting them stay warm near the fire. Each person in the circle then gave his or her name and said something like this: "My name is Gloria, and if you ever need someone to do washing or ironing, call on me."

"My name is Fred, and if you even need anybody to chop wood, call on me."

"My name is Marcia, and if you even need anybody to baby-sit..."

"My name is George, and if you ever need anybody to repair your house..."

"My name is Mary, and if you ever need a car to go to town..." and so on around the circle.

Then they ate and had a square dance. And then it was time to go and someone kicked sand over the dying fire. The first time Fred Craddock saw this, he was still standing when almost everyone had left, and he says "Percy Miller, with his thumbs in his bibbed overalls looked at me and said 'Craddock, folks don't ever get closer than this.'"

And Craddock finishes his story with these words. "In that little community they have a name for that. I've heard it used in other communities too. In that community their name for that is 'church.' They call that 'church.'"

We will be more than we are? Yes indeed.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled," said Jesus. "I am the way." "Come to him," said Peter, "and let yourselves be built....."

For 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."