

Fourth Sunday after Easter      In my Father's House

Acts 7.55-end; 1 Pet. 2.2-10; John 14.1-14

Set your hearts at rest; trust in God always. Let the Spirit come into you. Stephen, the first martyr of the church, must have had those words constantly in his mind before he was stoned to death for his belief. He told his attackers that they were deaf to the truth and resisting the Holy Spirit. Israel had spent too long in going the wrong way and persecuting the prophets who knew what was coming. Israel was the nation which had been uniquely privileged in receiving the message from angels – and what had they done with it? Spent their time in constant opposition to God's purposes for them, and rejecting his messengers.

Stephen's last words to them are that it's time for hypocrisy to be thrown out of the window and to enter the new and living temple with its living foundation stone, the new community of the new Israel. Get out of the darkness and into the light of God's people. That unpalatable truth – and indeed the truth very often does hurt – led to Stephen's death, but not before, just like Jesus at his death, he prayed for forgiveness for his murderers. The last words of the first Christian martyr are rather similar to those of his Master.

I wonder how many times you have thought about the scene at the last supper? We have plenty of visual aids to help us – Leonardo da Vinci to name just one. Although I do wonder sometimes if there's a message for us in the way that so famous painting has gradually and inexorably crumbled before our very eyes over the last 500 years. But, as so often, the visual picture is far less important than the spiritual one. If you had been one of the disciples on that fateful night in the upper room, how would you have been feeling? What would you have been thinking about on that night? And what about tomorrow, and the day after, and all the days of the rest of your life? A jump into the unknown without your guide perhaps? Your master is about to depart, but says he will come back – when might that be? Is his physical presence really necessary?

Along with the bread and the wine, you've just had the indescribable privilege of being received into a divine fellowship – and still whilst you're in an unworthy state. You've witnessed an act of grace, quite unearned and undeserved on your part. But already in that upper room there's a sense of disintegration – the world is about to change. The atmosphere may be quiet and apparently untroubled, but nobody is going to leave in any state of complete perfection – that's still a long way off.

The outward serenity of the last supper and its wonderful giving of gifts prefigures the great acts of self-giving which are to come for each and every person there.

Your master is about to go to his death, and one of you is going to betray him. And even the most loyal man there – Peter – is going to deny him three times. There could hardly be a more dismal prospect, and yet Jesus encourages all twelve of you by telling everybody about his departure – and his return. God willing, in three days' time you will see that death is impotent and has been surpassed, and that the real omnipotence lies in something else.

In my Father's house are many mansions. What sort of rooms and what sort of house are we to expect? Some translations make it sound like a rather cheap boarding house, sufficient for just a few nights. The truth is rather different. Somebody, possibly an archbishop, once joked that he Church of England was a club for everyone who wasn't a member. He was quite likely thinking of today's gospel passage, whose house has rooms which are not just for its members. Jesus may have said that nobody comes to the father except through me, but he also said "In my father's house are many mansions." For all people.

Those mansions or rooms are not just for a weekend or a holiday – they are an eternal dwelling place. In them – and therefore in Jesus - we are set free from having to worship in a set place or time with the usual paraphernalia around us. Now we are free from materialistic worship – free to worship in Spirit. The crucifixion has opened the kingdom to all believers, not just to those of one prescribed religion. Many people who profess a love of Jesus do not subscribe to the religion which claims a monopoly of him. The many mansions or rooms offer a universal salvation – for Christian and non-Christian

Thomas innocently asks Jesus "Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" If only Thomas knew – he and the other apostles don't need to find the way – they're already looking right at it. Jesus doesn't need to pass on great truths about the father – he is the truth himself.

None of the apostles left that upper room in a state of perfection – and how very far they were from it. "If you knew me you would know my father too. From now on you do know him; you have seen him." Now Philip reveals his lack of understanding by asking to see the Father – just that and no more. He clearly believes that the Father and the Son are two

separate and distinct persons. Are they not one and the same? He can see no unity, and by asking that question, he proves it. He has yet to learn that going to the father is not leaving Jesus behind

The apostles are on the brink of a new age, unprepared and unknowing as they are. The one great task they have to do that Jesus has not done, and which will make them great, is to have the privilege of carrying the message of belief far and wide out to the Greeks and to all the other Gentiles. After the crucifixion, and only now, they can proclaim what Jesus couldn't proclaim – that the death of Jesus was an historical event which HAD finally brought God and man together on this earth.

In my father's house are many mansions, and the doors are always open – for Christian and non-Christian, believer and non-believer. For all those who seek the way, the truth and the life. When Saul was persecuting the disciples of the Lord, St Luke described those people as being “of the way”. Later they would become “the Church”. Today, the way sometimes seems obscure and difficult; we have lost the way, and struggle valiantly to find it again. We can think again of Thomas who asked Jesus “How can we know the way?” The answer is not an intellectual one with the hard facts in front of our eyes, but rather by the bond of love between us and Christ, and obedience to his commands.

Let us shut our eyes and we will see.

The apostles lost their master and it seemed as if they were about to embark on their great mission like a ship without a rudder. They were in desperate need of a counsellor to watch over them and keep their path straight and free from dangers. There was no person up at the front of the group they could keep their eyes on. But their fears were not justified - they were not going to set out on their travels into the unknown without support or guidance, for then something wonderful happened – the gift of the Holy Spirit, the spirit of truth, which would mark them off from the rest of the world.

If we cannot see Jesus for the Son that he really is, then neither can we discern the presence of that Spirit of truth. The disciples knew him because he was dwelling in them. With that spirit filling their minds and bodies they set out to unknown lands and peoples with their extraordinary and life-changing message.

Today we stand half-way between Easter and Pentecost, our two greatest festivals. There are fifty days between them (the Greek pentekoste), and

in three weeks' time the Bishop will be here to preside at that morning's eucharist. The Bishop is a living and visible presence of the apostolic succession, and a direct descendant of those first twelve apostles. By his consecration to the Episcopal office he has inherited the transmission of the Holy Ghost and the power to continue the work of his ancient predecessors. We look to him for encouragement and affirmation in our faith, just as those who knew nothing of Christ in the first century looked to the apostles for the message of salvation.

Those who have eyes to see, let them see, but better still, those who have the mind to see, let them close their eyes and see a far greater and enduring vision.